

JASON HAMILTON



SEEDS OF HOPE

ROOTS OF CREATION BOOK 7
AN EPIC YA FANTASY ADVENTURE

Seeds of Hope

Roots of Creation Book 7

Jason Hamilton

Story Hobby Media

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About the Author

Also by Jason Hamilton

As Jak emerged through the portal, she found herself face to face with a sweaty, snarling demon.

She didn't move. The demon couldn't see her just yet, thanks to Viona, who held Jak's hand in hers, on her right. Viona was a Shadow Elf, and she was the reason why the demon couldn't see them. She would have to thank the ancestors later for the elf's powers of invisibility.

Jak's other hand held that of Li, her friend from the eastern nations, and an expert at working behind the back of tyrannical leadership. And they were going to need that.

The demon sniffed, and Jak stilled her breathing. She hoped to the High Relics that it couldn't smell her. Demons used to be humans, right? Hopefully that meant their senses were only as attuned as humans, and not enhanced like an animal. But she wouldn't make any assumptions.

They were in a room built with wood, a lot of wood. Everything from the floor to the walls, and even the ceiling were built with large wooden planks. Jak was from Riverbrook where there was very little wood. Most of the buildings there were made of stone, with thatched ceilings. The same was true of Skyecliff, the only big city Jak had ever visited.

The room was large, big enough to be a chapel or audience chamber fit for a king. Rows of wooden chairs lined the edges, and large columns, that looked like they could be whole tree trunks, stood in the center, holding up the roof.

The building was lit from the flickering purple light of the portal behind them, and from a large, rectangular fire that burned in the center of the room. Wouldn't that be dangerous? They could burn the whole building down.

But Jak didn't spare much time looking at the fire pit. The demon that stood mere inches from her face was one of many, all of whom were staring directly at her. Well, not at her specifically, but at what was behind her.

The portal was still active, the gateway they had used to get back to Earth from Illadar. The portals did not last long, but Bretton, an Ice Fae, had used his abilities to temporarily hold it in place long enough for Jak, Viona, and Li to all make it through. Jak turned to blink at the shimmering portal. She was surprised it was still active.

But just as she thought it, the portal flickered and died, its electric form leaving an after-burn in her eyes.

"No!" shouted an angry voice. "I had it that time." And now she saw him. Cain stood on the other side of where the portal had once stood, his body of melted flesh terrifying in the firelight. In his hands were the white and black shafts of the Pillars of Eternity, the two more powerful Relics that Jak had used to create Illadar, before Marek had betrayed her and taken them away. Even now, Jak bore a Void brand on her right hand, a brand that kept her from using any of her other powers, and that made her feel even more exposed.

Jak swallowed. She had anticipated he would be here, but seeing him now only increased the dread in her stomach. Cain also had demons by his side, which meant she was literally surrounded by demons. She gave both Li and Viona's hands a little squeeze to comfort them. If they just remained still, and Viona's elf magic continued to work, they might have a shot of getting out of this. But if even one demon bumped into them...

Cain yelled, threw aside the Pillars of Eternity, picked up a demon with a telekinetic hold, and squeezed his fist. The demon whined as the telekinetic barrier closed in on itself, and Jak closed her eyes as she heard the sickening crunch of the demon's bones. Its whines cut off abruptly.

"You told me it would work this time," Cain bellowed. "I even managed to communicate with them."

Jak opened her eyes to see that Cain and the demons were not alone in the room. A cowering figure knelt several paces away from Cain. The figure was clothed in black, and the skin on his face and hands was pale.

"...I'm very sorry, your greatness!" The quivering man stammered. His face was bowed, but Jak's eyes widened as she recognized that voice. That man was the Royal Priest, the nameless man in charge of the Royal Church of Skyecliff. He looked nothing like the last time Jak had seen him. Now he was splayed across the wooden floor, and every muscle of his body was trembling. His body had grown thin, and his face was gaunt. Clearly, he feared Cain, and Jak couldn't blame him.

A slight tug on her hand, and Jak turned to see Li trying to pull Jak somewhere. She could see nothing as she faced the space where Li would be standing, but of course that was what happened. It was too bad Viona's invisibility also made it impossible to see each other.

But she quickly realized what Li was trying to do. After Cain had executed the one demon, he had opened up a hole among the others surrounding them. If they were careful, they could work their way to the side of the building, where they would be less discoverable.

Jak gave Li's hand a small squeeze to acknowledge she understood, then gently pulled on Viona's hand as well. Once the Shadow Elf had the right idea, the three of them tiptoed past the demons to one side of the wooden building. Jak almost stopped herself from breathing as they progressed. The demons surrounding them did not budge, but a few of their nostrils flared, and their eyes twitched.

It was only then that she realized Cain hadn't said much since they arrived. She glanced back at the demon king to see him scanning the room. "I...sense something," he said. His eyes lingered for a moment on the place where they stood.

Jak swallowed hard. The connection between her and Cain might end up being the death of them now. She could feel it too, though in her case the feeling was a sickness in her stomach, an unease that emanated from Cain. If Cain were to find them...

The Royal Priest, who seemed not to have noticed, continued to grovel on the floor. "I will make sure you unlock the secrets of the Pillars, I promise."

Cain's attention moved back to the Priest. "I gave you my gifts," he said, advancing on the man. "I gave you Relics that granted you power beyond your wildest dreams. Power you used to sway the people of Skyecliff. But with all your talk of understanding the most powerful Relics, you still fail me!"

Cain advanced on the man, stooping low to grab him by the hair. The Royal Priest cried out and clutched at Cain's arm. Then in a flash, Jak saw something peculiar. The Priest's brand flashed to life, then extinguished itself as soon as it did so. The Royal Priest had a Void brand. Jak remembered all too well how the man had temporarily robbed her of her powers about a year ago. Yet it seemingly had no effect on Cain.

That was interesting.

Cain sneered at the Royal Priest. "You know that doesn't work on me."

"Forgive me, my lord!" The Royal Priest was hysterical. "It...it was a...a temporary lapse in judgment, a stupid response, nothing more. Please do not punish me!"

Jak squinted at the priest. He had just tried to use his Void brand on Cain, and it hadn't worked. That had to mean that Cain was somehow immune to Void brands. And if Cain could be immune...

"My *loyal* servant is on his way with another who could help me secure mastery of the Pillars. Tell me, why do I need you?"

"No one understands alchemy and strange brands better than me, your greatness," said the Royal Priest in a hurry. "If I cannot help you, there's no chance this person you speak of will be able to."

Cain's voice grew cold. "This person has already used a Pillar of Eternity once before."

Jak's heart leapt, momentarily forgetting Cain's apparent immunity to Void brands. They were talking about Naem! He was the only one besides herself that had used the Pillars, at least to her knowledge. And Cain said his most loyal follower was bringing Naem. That had to be Marek.

"I'm so sorry, great one," said the Royal Priest, his voice rising in pitch as Cain's grip tightened. Clearly he knew of nothing else to say. "I am sure it will simply take time. You've made such incredible progress already."

Cain let out a soft chuckle, clearly enjoying torturing the man. He flung him down to the ground with a thunk. "You have no need to fear death just yet. The man will not likely submit to me so easily."

"But surely, with your brand that controls minds," the Royal Priest began.

"True, I can compel him with those brand, but it remains unclear whether he will be able to use the Pillars under such duress. The brands haven't worked on the Pillars directly, after all."

"And what a surprise that was."

"Silence!" Cain was growing impatient with the man. "There will be other ways. I will need you to examine his blood, as you so seem to love doing. Perhaps we will find something of interest, something we can use to trick the Pillars of Eternity."

"Of course, my master, it will be as you say."

Cain spoke almost as if to himself, "and perhaps Marek will have news of the dragon as well. My...negotiations with the Pillars might go very differently if I could threaten them with dragon fire."

"Yes, my master."

"Now get out of my sight!" Cain bellowed. The Royal Priest yelped and scrambled to his feet, slipping in an effort to remove himself from the room as fast as possible.

Jak watched him go. She almost felt bad for the wretch. She harbored no kind feelings for the man, but no one deserved the punishment and torment that Cain was capable of inflicting.

Cain remained for a while longer, which meant Jak kept her breathing to a minimum. So far, none of the demons had taken notice, and they were safely pressed against a wall to avoid accidentally bumping into any of them. But that didn't cause her fears to lessen, especially now that the room had quieted. Cain likely had several enhanced senses, thanks to his brands. If any of them moved a muscle,

he could potentially find them.

But Cain walked to the side where he had thrown the Pillars of Eternity, and gathered them up. Jak swallowed. She'd secretly wished he would have left them so she could collect them later, but that was unrealistic thinking.

Cain cradled the Pillars in his arms for a moment, before retreating through a door in the back of the room, likely a personal study of some kind, or some private quarters. The demons surrounding the room did not budge. Each one remained exactly where it had been the whole time. It looked like Cain was keeping them around as personal guards of some kind, or maybe they were just there so he could send them through the portals. Regardless, they appeared to have no other purpose, so they simply remained.

Li tugged on Jak's hand again, and this time Jak knew immediately what the woman wanted. It was time to leave. There were three doors that Jak could see. There was the one Cain had disappeared through, though following him was out of the question. There was also the one the Royal Priest had used, but there were so many demons between here and there, so that was equally unlikely.

That left the large door at the far end of the hall, where there were fewer demons. If they could make it to the door, they might be able to crack it open and slip through with little suspicion. A demon might come to investigate, but they could get away fast enough once they were through the door. Hopefully.

As silently as possible, the three of them began inching their way along the side of the building towards the door. It was long and tense work. Once, Li stepped on a loose floorboard and the resulting creak was enough to stop Jak's heart. A few demon ears twitched. Yes, they were still listening, still aware of their surroundings, even though they were predominantly controlled by Cain. Thankfully, none of them moved.

Both Jak and Viona avoided the same creaking floorboard, and they continued on their way. Since the entire floor was made of wood, they were extra careful after that first incident, to test out each board before putting their entire weight on it, managing to avoid making too much noise.

Finally, they were at the door. But now came the greater challenge. The nearest demon was about thirty feet away, but that was still close enough that it could easily see or hear the door being opened.

Since both of Jak's hands were busy holding onto Viona and Li, she gave Li's hand a little squeeze, indicating that she should be the one to open the door. Jak stared hard at the metal latch. Ever so slowly, it lifted, making almost no sound, at least none that could be heard by anyone other than the three of them.

Once the latch was free, Jak waited as Li tugged at the door. It

moved with a groan that echoed through the room. Jak turned her head just in time to see every demon facing in their direction, the glint of the firelight causing twin points of light to stare at them from all sides.

"Go, go," she whispered.

The door swung open just enough for the three of them to slip out. Li went first, followed by Jak, then Viona.

They were outside, Jak realized with relief. And it was mid-day, judging by the brightness of the sun. But Jak didn't stop to take in her surroundings just yet. She pulled on both Viona and Li's hands and they hurried as fast as they dared down a series of stone steps that led down a hill. Apparently they had been inside an enormous wooden palace of some kind, and now they were descending into a city.

It was a large city, but one Jak did not recognize from any of her travels. She'd not been here before. Like the palace itself, most of the buildings were made out of wood, though many were blackened and ruined from fire. There was little to no plant life around them.

They crossed a bridge, and Jak glanced down to see a rushing of filthy water far below. It was like a river, but with man-made banks. She had never seen anything quite like it.

What was most unusual for a city of this size was the fact that there were no people in it. None at all. Jak spotted a few demons, though. There weren't nearly as many as she had seen inside the wooden palace, but enough to make it clear why there were no humans in sight. Clearly the city had been overrun, and these demons were now patrolling.

"We're in Tradehall," whispered Viona once they were safely away from the palace and any nearby demons. Jak glanced back at the door to the palace, and noted with some relief that no demons had followed them. Chances were that they, or their master, had assumed the door had blown open with the wind, or something like that.

She turned back to look at the rest of the city. Tradehall. Well that made sense now that she was looking at it. The bridge they had just crossed was one of many, and everyone knew Tradehall was situated at the convergence of several smaller rivers into the massive river that led to Skyecliff. Tradehall provided a central hub of trade for the entire west, and many of what they brought in from nearby nations was shipped down the river to Skyecliff, making it a centerpoint of trade between the west and the east. But what had happened to it?

Most of the buildings were in ruins, save for the palace they had exited. It looked as if a large battle had taken place here, though Jak could see no corpses. Yet her eyes did catch the occasional gleam of weapons or perhaps armor mixed in with the mud. She swallowed, not wanting to think about what the demons might have done with the

people those weapons and armor had once belonged to.

“What happened here?” Li’s comment mirrored what Jak was thinking.

“Cain must have laid waste to the area,” said Jak. “Disrupting the trade in the kingdom will not only have devastating effects on the people here, but on the nations on either side.”

“That’s true,” said Li. “We in the eastern nations relied on trade through your country for anything that came from further west, and a lot of southern supplies as well.”

“So what do we do?” said Viona. “We’re likely to get caught if we stay here long enough. The only living creatures I can see are the demons. Not even any plant life.”

“Yes, it is sad,” said Li, her voice weary. Jak glanced in the direction of Li’s voice. Viona still held up her elf magic, so Jak couldn’t see her companion, but she imagined Li still wasn’t feeling very well, judging by her tone. And they weren’t exactly in the best position to help her. But at least they were out of the cold of Illadar. That should help at least.

“We should probably try and leave the city if we can,” said Jak. “Find some resources like food and drinking water.”

“We can’t go too far though,” said Viona.

Jak shook her head. “No, Cain has the Pillars of Eternity, and we will need those. Besides, it sounds like someone is bringing Naem, based on that conversation we just overheard.”

“Ah, so it was him,” said Li. “I was wondering who would have successfully used the Pillars of Eternity in the past.”

Jak nodded, though realized too late that neither of the other two could see the gesture. “Yes, only he and I have ever used them, to my knowledge.”

“Then we’ll need to move fast,” said Li. “It sounds like he could be on the verge of bending the Pillars to his will.”

“We will have a hard time getting back into that palace, much less taking the Pillars away from Cain,” said Viona. “It’s likely he has them on his person at all times, or nearly so. We could probably expect that he protects them somehow as well.”

Viona was right, but Jak’s thoughts had strayed to something else. “Did you guys see how the Royal Priest’s Void brand didn’t work on Cain?”

The others hesitated at her apparent change of subject. “I remember that,” said Viona. “What of it?”

“Back when I was in Skyecliff, the Royal Priest used his brand on me, and it caused my powers to become useless. Just like the Void brand I have now.”

“Oh...” Viona seemed to be getting the picture. “So you’re saying

he must have something that keeps the Void brand from hurting him.”

“I think so.”

“But what would give him such protection? Another brand maybe?”

Jak nodded. She had been thinking of other brands. After all, Cain had knowledge she didn’t, and Gabriel had even told her that Cain would be her best source of knowledge on how to recover her powers. “And if he can have a brand that does that for him, if I received the same brand...”

“You could get your powers back,” said Li, in an excited voice.

Viona shushed them both. Jak winced and glanced around. There were still demons in the vicinity, and they couldn’t forget about that. They had to stay quiet. This was going to be a long trek if they had to get through the entire city linking hands so that Viona’s magic could...

Something moved off to one side, a brief flicker of motion within one of the ruined buildings. Jak squinted to get a better look.

There it was again. A small form was moving from building to building, far too irregular and strategic to be a demon.

“Hey,” she whispered. “Look over by those buildings. The ones next to the second bridge ahead of us.”

It wasn’t long before Viona spoke. “I see it. Someone is moving over there. Looks like a small child.”

Jak silently blessed the elf’s superior eyesight. “It’s not a demon, right?”

“Not from what I can tell. Perhaps we should move closer.”

They did so, taking another bridge across a large canal, still trying to keep their feet from making too much noise over the wooden crossing. As they approached, Jak got a better look at the child.

He was young, probably seven or eight years old. He kept peeking around corners through broken windows, looking for demons. But he moved methodically from one burned house to another, and even ran into the street long enough to place something on the ground. Jak squinted, trying to get a good look at whatever it was.

“Looks like some kind of animal trap,” said Viona. “For large animals.”

As they neared, Jak could see that Viona was right. The object was made of two large, wicked looking metal jaws that looked like they might take your leg off if you stepped into it. She’d seen her father use such tools to catch wolves at night, though his had been smaller.

“You think the boy is setting traps for the demons?” suggested Li.

“That has to be it,” said Jak.

“Seems a dangerous thing to be doing.”

Jak sought out the boy, hiding in a nearby house now. They would

have to keep their voices down or he would discover them.

"Perhaps he's not alone," suggested Viona in a whisper. "Why don't we follow him?"

Jak considered the options. There wasn't much else to do. The city held nothing that would help them in the immediate future. They needed a place where they could regroup and recover. Perhaps the boy could lead them to such a place.

"How are you feeling, Viona?" she asked. It couldn't be very easy to keep the three of them hidden like this for so long.

"That's why I suggested following the boy. I'll need to find a place where I can rest for a while after this."

"Well that settles it as far as I'm concerned," Jak squeezed each of their hands a little harder. "We follow."

The boy spent a short amount of time continuing to set up the traps, but his small frame could only drag so many of the heavy items around with him, so it didn't take long before he was out. He then began weaving his way down the many side passages of the city. Jak couldn't help but feel bad for all of the people who had likely lived and died here. It was an enormous city, but now there was nothing but burnt wood and mud.

The boy eventually found a stone passage that led down to one of the canals. This canal was moving slower than some of the others Jak had seen, but the water was still progressing with plenty of force between its stone embankment.

But instead of following the canal, the boy disappeared inside a large stone opening in one side. Jak had seen similar outlets in Skyecliff, though those had emptied into the ocean. The boy was going into the sewers.

They hurried to catch up with the boy before he could disappear down a side passage. Jak wrinkled her nose to block out the smell of feces, decay, and she didn't want to know what else. Nevertheless, all three of them managed to step inside and continue their pursuit of the boy.

It was tricky business, trying to stay far enough back so that the boy wouldn't hear their footsteps, whilst staying close enough to keep from losing him. There were countless offshoots in these sewers, and it would be easy to lose the boy if they rounded a corner and he had already continued on down another passage.

In addition, there was very little light to go by. Soon Viona took the lead, as she could see in the dark, and the rest of them relied on their ears to locate where the boy was going.

Soon, the sewers widened to accommodate more drainage pipes. So far, they hadn't encountered much actual sewage. That was probably due to the fact that people obviously hadn't lived in the city

for days. But now that they were in these larger passages, Jak could see and smell far more of the stuff. She silently wished her hands weren't connected to Viona and Li, preventing her from covering her nose.

They climbed some steps onto a sort of rampart that sat alongside the main sewer line. Well, at least they didn't have to trudge through the stuff any longer. Though Jak was pretty sure she'd never fully get her boots clean after this.

The boy disappeared ahead of them, turning left into another passageway. There was light down that way. They must be getting close to the boy's destination. When they caught up and rounded the corner, they froze.

The passageway led to a much larger complex, surprisingly large for an underground sewer. This part had two drainage ditches with clean water running on either side, ultimately emptying into the passages behind them. Perhaps the clean water was meant to help wash away the sewage into the main canal. It was probably diverted from one of the converging rivers, a portion of the water sectioned off to provide a modicum of cleanliness, though the smell still filled the air, even here.

But what caused all three of them to stop moving upon rounding the corner, was the large group of men and women that awaited the young boy at the end of the passage.

T

hey stood in a round room, with the clean water moving through troughs around the edges. There were maybe fifty of them, some lounging on makeshift beds and chairs, others bearing armor. They greeted the boy warmly as he arrived, though Jak couldn't catch any obvious signs of a parent. Likely the boy's parents were dead, because no mother would allow her son to go out and risk his life like this boy had.

"What should we do now?" Asked Viona. "We may need to make contact with these people."

"If they do not kill us the moment we reveal ourselves," added Li, skeptically.

Jak agreed, with both of them. Whoever these people were, they were obviously not friendly to Cain and his demons. But how would they react if Jak and her companions simply appeared out of thin air?

"Well done, lad," said one of the men ahead of them, a man of average height, but covered in light armor. His brown hair was long, and he had a short beard, but he was well groomed. And there was something almost familiar about him.

"I can go back," said the young boy. "Give me more traps and I can set them."

"Not today," said the brown-haired man, tousling the boy's hair with one hand. "Remember you're not the only one working to eliminate the demons. We can't draw too much attention to ourselves."

She did recognize this man, though she hadn't seen him for over two years, since she had left Riverbrook the first time, after her father's death. It was Naman, Marek's father. But he looked so different. She'd never seen him in armor before, and his long hair and beard were new. From what she could tell, the others looked to him as the leader of their group. Since when had Naman been leadership material?

"It's okay, Viona. You can let your magic fall. I know that man."

"Are you sure?" said Viona, her voice hesitant.

“Yes, he used to live in Riverbrook.”

After a moment, a slight wave of energy passed between the three of them, and Jak turned to see Viona’s shadowy form on one side, and Li to her right. Li still didn’t look very well. Her face was still an ashen greenish-gray. Well, perhaps these people had a Healer, or at least some nourishment.

“Naman,” she called out gently down the passageway, trying to sound friendly.

The reaction she got was almost satisfying. Weapons were raised, dozens of heads and bodies spun in their direction. The small boy yelled and darted behind Naman who had his dagger at the ready in a heartbeat. One woman, a Flamedancer, ignited fire in both her palms. Other brands lit up the dark passageway as people prepared themselves for a fight.

Jak raised both arms. “It’s okay, I’m not with Cain.” She walked closer, hopeful that Naman would recognize her.

“Stay back,” said a woman beside Naman. Jak instantly recognized her as Jamilla, Naman’s wife, and Marek’s mother.

“Jamilla,” she said. “It’s okay, it’s me, Jak.”

“Jak?” said Naman. His posture relaxed slightly, and he took a step forward. “That can’t be you, is it?”

“It’s me,” Jak repeated. “I’m here with some friends.”

As Jak moved closer into the light, Naman tightened his grip on the dagger and raised it a few inches. “You have multiple brands. Like a demon.”

“It’s a long story,” Jak replied. She had been expecting this. Not everyone had heard about her ability to give and receive multiple brands. Not that any of them worked right now anyway. “Have you heard of the Fae?”

At that, Viona took a step forward. The others tensed at seeing her emerge so suddenly. Even when visible, Viona seemed to blend into the shadows all around them.

But to Jak’s surprise, the others relaxed when they saw Viona. She was expecting the opposite. Usually people were more put off by the Shadow Elves’ appearance than the fact that Jak was somehow sane after receiving multiple brands.

Naman spoke, “An honor, Shadow Elf,” he said, bringing his brand hand to his chest. Naman had Sleeplessness, which wasn’t all that useful in combat, but it had made him a very successful businessman in Riverbrook.

“How do you know what I am?” responded Viona.

“We’ve met others of your kind,” said Naman. “There are two of you in the city, though one is with another rebel cell, and the other is off helping with our resistance efforts. I can take you to them later if

you like.”

“They’re here?” Viona’s voice carried a hint of joy. And Jak felt the same. Karlona had previously dispatched a few Shadow Elves to Skyecliff and Tradehall, hoping to aid Naem’s efforts of recruiting people to join them at Illadar.

“I will make sure they know you have arrived. But you’ll have to tell us how you got here. Are you here to help?”

Jak inclined her head. “We are, though we’re not likely to be as much help as you think.”

“I assume, based on your brands, that you’re that hero I’ve heard about. The Shadow Elves described a great leader that took down an entire army of demons. I had no idea it was you, though.”

“It was me, but I no longer have those abilities anymore. Perhaps we can exchange stories?”

Naman put down his dagger, and others followed suit lowering their weapons. “Well, I think that sounds like a good plan.”

“Although,” Jak said, remembering, “Do you have any Healers?” She waved back at Li. “My companion is sick.”

“We do, in fact. I will see if she is willing to help.” Naman turned and nodded to someone in the back of their group, who retreated further into the sewers.

“In the meantime,” said Jamilla. “You have a long story to tell us.”



JAK SPENT the next few minutes explaining the big picture of everything that had happened to her. She talked about the emergence of the Fae, and how they seemed to be arriving one right after the other, created to help form Illadar among other things, usually with the help of a powerful Relic.

She talked about Seph and his book of Illadar, and how she herself was mentioned in the book’s prophecies. She mentioned her time with Cain in Mt. Harafast, and later after battling the queen when she had fought him on top of Mt. Knot. She talked about the Pillars of Eternity, the role they had played in the creation of Illadar, and how Cain had managed to take them from her.

What she didn’t mention was Marek. She quickly learned that Naman and Jamilla had learned of Marek’s death following the battle at Foothold. And they still thought he was dead. They didn’t know that he was not only alive, but had joined Cain, either of his own choice or by some sort of compulsion. Jak suspected the latter. She was going to have to find a better way to break that news to them.

She ended by talking about her time without the use of her brands,

and how those who followed her only barely managed to survive on Illadar. Things had been better by the time she left, but Jak still needed to find a way back as soon as possible. Especially so she could bring additional food, medical supplies, or even a few Healers if possible. They would need everyone to pitch in.

As she finished, the messenger Naman had sent returned with a woman who must have been the Healer. Indeed, Jak quickly made out the brand on the woman's left hand. The woman was in her upper middle-aged years, about the age of Naman and Jamilla. But for the second time that day, Jak thought she saw something familiar. The woman's hair was strawberry blonde, exactly like another person Jak knew.

"My name is Raine," she said, "I'm told someone needs healing?"

Naman nodded and pointed at Li, who was now lying down on a small cot the others had brought for her. But Jak was busy trying to place the newcomer. Her voice had seemed familiar as well.

"Are you at all related to a girl named Amelia?" she asked.

Raine spun to look at Jak, momentarily forgetting Li. "You've had word about my daughter?"

Jak's face lit up. So this was Amelia's mother. "Yes, I'm her friend. We met in Skyecliff."

"You talk of her like she's still alive..." the woman hesitated as she spoke, as if worried that Jak might say otherwise. "I haven't heard anything about her since there was a demon attack on Skyecliff. We assumed..."

"She's alive," Jak confirmed. "Though you might not recognize her if you saw her. She's become a Water Fae."

The woman took a while to process that. "Water Fae?"

"Yes, they have a large tail fin, and live in the water. Last I saw her, she was safe."

"Where is she?" Raine stepped closer to Jak, Li was completely forgotten on her cot. "I have to see her."

Jak hesitated. "It's a little more complicated than that. Amelia is on Illadar, which is another planet. We can't really get there from here at the moment."

Raine blinked at her, saying nothing. Jak shrugged.

"She can explain later," said Naman. "Right now you have a sick one to attend."

"Oh yes, I apologize," said Raine, jumping back to her work. "I...I will have to talk to you later, girl."

"I'm Jak," she said. "I'd be happy to tell you everything."

Raine got to work while Jak backtracked a bit to fill the healer in. At one point though, she had to ask Naman about what happened to him and Jamilla after they had left Riverbrook and split from the

Watchers.

"Not much, to be honest," replied Naman, who was sitting down on a cut log that must have been brought from the upper city. "I managed to find some work, cleaning out the stables for the Grand Master of Tradehall, the one appointed by the queen. It wasn't much, but at least it gave us a roof over our heads. Not all of the refugees from Riverbrook were so lucky. Anyway, we stayed until this man, Cain shows up. First thing he does, he kills the Grand Master publicly, in front of everyone, burns almost the entire city to the ground, and brings in a bunch of demons he can apparently control."

Jak nodded, "He's the reason the demons exist at all."

"Those of us who got away, came down here, to the sewers. Nearly impossible for someone to find a person down here, if we don't want to be found. There are several hundred of us left, and since this is Tradehall, we've got plenty of provisions. Explosives too."

Li perked up from where she was lying. "Explosives?" Raine gently put a hand on Li's collar bone to have her lie down again.

"Yes, we have a lot of them down here." He nodded at Li. "I suppose you might know why, since judging by your accent and appearance you're from the eastern nations."

"We invented explosives," said Li, with an air of smugness to her. Jak almost smiled.

"We heard about you, of course," said Jamilla, bringing the conversation back to Jak. "Rumors of a girl with red in her hair circulated after Foothold. And they only grew from there." Jamilla's face fell and she stared at the ground. Jak pressed her lips together. She knew what Jamilla was thinking.

"Both of you," she said, slowly. "There's something you need to know about Marek."

"We told you, we know he died at Foothold," said Jamilla, turning her face away. Clearly she didn't need to approach the subject. That made what Jak was about to say even harder.

"I'm afraid it's actually worse than that," said Jak, choosing her words carefully.

"Worse than death?" Naman asked, his eyes narrowing.

"You see," Jak tried to find the right words, but nothing acceptable came. "Cain has a way of bending people to his will. It turns out he actually took Marek and made him...I don't know, a slave of sorts." She wasn't actually sure it worked like that. Marek wasn't a slave in the sense that a demon was. He still had some measure of consciousness left. But it would be better for his parents if they thought Marek was being compelled somehow.

"You mean, he's still alive?" Jamilla's face had lost all color.

"No," said Jak. "Not really. Remember what I told you about how I

lost the use of my brands? That wasn't Cain who did that to me, it was Marek. He gave me the Void brand and took the Pillars of Eternity before leaving me to die on a frozen planet. The real Marek wouldn't do that. His mind has been corrupted by Cain."

Both Naman and Jamilla did not say a word. They stared into space, as if in shock, which they probably were.

"I'm really sorry, I wouldn't have told you except, well he might be coming here."

That brought both of their heads up to meet her eyes. "How do you know that?"

J

Jak proceeded to tell them the rest of her tale, after coming through the portal and the conversation they'd overheard between Cain and the Royal Priest. Cain had mentioned that someone who'd used the Pillars of Eternity, Naem, was being brought by his most loyal servant, which she assumed could only be Marek, unless there was someone she didn't know about.

"You have to promise me," she said as she finished the story, "that you won't try to speak with him if you see him. He's not the same Marek. He will likely kill you if he sees you. He almost did to me."

"Almost," said Jamilla. "But he didn't. He could have, but he sent you through the portal instead."

Jak locked eyes with the woman, trying to communicate the importance of what she was saying. "Please, do not contact him. It's not worth the risk."

"She's right, Jamilla," said Naman. "We came to terms with his death many months ago. If what Jak says is true, perhaps it's best if we leave it that way."

Jamilla looked unconvinced but said nothing.

"Hm, that's odd," said Raine. She wasn't looking at them, but down at Li.

"What is it?" Jak asked.

"Well, I've been working on this one for a while now, but for the life of me I can't see anything wrong with her."

Jak frowned, as did Li. "I've been ill for days," said the woman. "I barely have any strength, and I feel like vomiting half the time."

"Yes, clearly there's something wrong with you, but it must not have anything to do with a normal illness. When did your symptoms start?"

Li looked at Jak. "A few days after we arrived on Illadar."

Something tickled the back of Jak's mind. That pretty much fit what she remembered.

Raine continued with another question, "and has it worsened or progressed much since you first contracted it?"

"I can't say it has," replied Li. "That's why I even volunteered to travel. I figured I wasn't getting any worse, so it could only help to come here. It started after leaving this planet after all."

"Li," said Jak, a thought touching her mind. "You began to get sick around the same time that Bretton and his group became Ice Fae, didn't you?"

Li thought about it, then nodded. "I did. You think there's any correlation?"

"Just a thought," said Jak, tapping a finger on her lips. "You don't suppose it has anything to do with becoming a Fae, do you? I've seen it happen so many times now that we can't rule it out."

"I actually thought of that," said Li, without skipping a beat. "It's certainly possible. But I didn't know of anyone else with the same condition. And besides, a Fae that is sick all the time? What kind of a Fae would that be? And it's not like I've suddenly gained new abilities."

Jak stared into space. "Yeah, that is a bit odd."

Silence stretched on for a time while she thought it through. Finally Raine cleared her throat.

"Well, we shall have to keep an eye on it, in any case. There's nothing more I can do, though I would prescribe plenty of rest, and hot soup. It's getting colder out there, after all."

Viona chuckled. "You have no idea what cold is."

Jak glanced at the Shadow Elf, who had remained silent for most of the conversation. Yes, she knew just how bad the cold had become on Illadar. It was partly because of the weather that hostilities had broken out between the Shadow Elves and the humans. Though most of that had been facilitated by Vander, the previous leader of the Shadow Elves.

"So what are your plans," said Jak, shifting the focus back to Naman. Hopefully she could get Viona's thoughts off her former leader's betrayal. "You said there are Shadow Elves in the city. We would love to meet with them."

"We can certainly arrange that," said Naman, placing one hand firmly on his knee. "Mostly we've been employing guerrilla tactics, since none of us are capable of going up against this Cain directly."

"No one is," Jak confirmed. "Even if you managed to get close enough to damage him, he has some way of healing himself instantly. That makes him all but immortal."

Naman's eyes widened slightly at that, but he continued, "Yes, well anyway we've been collecting explosives and laying traps where we can. We were hoping to take out what's left of the city, to be honest, especially the central palace structure. There's no one left to enjoy it after all. We figured Cain shouldn't have it if no one else can."

Jak shrugged. It was a good enough plan, considering the situation. But they didn't know Cain like she did. The destruction of Cain's little base would be more of a nuisance to him than anything. He would simply regroup somewhere else, and as soon as he controlled the pillars, he could go practically anywhere.

"We have a few objectives to add to that list," said Jak. "Though it will be dangerous."

"What we've been doing hasn't exactly been a walk in the park," replied Naman, raising his arms as if inviting her to say whatever she needed to say.

"Well then," she went on. "The biggest priority is to rid Cain of the Pillars of Eternity. There might be a way to destroy them, but I think that's unlikely given our resources, even the explosives. Those Relics are resistant to almost anything."

Jamilla was nodding alongside Naman. "I think I've seen these Pillars. I was there when he first arrived. Two staffs? One white and one black?"

"Those are the ones," confirmed Jak.

"It won't be easy," said Naman.

"I just told you it wouldn't be."

Naman chuckled. "Who would have thought two years ago that we would be here now, eh?"

Jak smiled back. Somehow, being around Naman and Jamilla, people she had grown up with, made the hardships a bit easier. It was nice knowing there were others who supported her.

"Any other objectives?" asked Jamilla.

"Well, if we can't get the Pillars out," Jak began. "Or even if we can, we will need to extract my friend Naem once he's brought here. He's the only one to ever handle the Pillars of Eternity, besides myself. If Cain is somehow able to use that, he could gain control of the Pillars and that is something we definitely don't want to happen."

Naman nodded. "Very well, we'll add that to the top of our list. If he is less guarded than the Pillars, perhaps he will be the top priority. After all, if Cain doesn't have him, he can't use him to activate the Pillars."

Jak nodded at that. It made sense.

"Is that it?" asked Naman.

Jak hesitated. There was one other thing, though she felt bad asking the others for help on something more personal.

"I..." she trailed off.

Raine spoke from where she was sitting next to Li. "Speak up girl, you don't have to be embarrassed because of us."

Jak's mood lifted. That had sounded like something Amelia might have said.

“Very well. I’ve recently learned that Cain might have a brand of some kind that makes him immune to a Void brand. If I could somehow receive that brand, I could potentially re-enable all my old brands. That would make it easier to accomplish all of the other objectives. I could even fight Cain, or at least hold him off.”

“You would need a Gifter to perform the brand, and most gifters can’t give multiple brands,” said Viona. Her arms were folded, but she bore no emotion Jak could clearly identify.

“True, but they could brand a strap of leather or something that I could tie to my arm,” Jak replied.

“We do have a Gifter among us,” said Naman. “Just the one, but I’m sure he’d be willing to help. He’s with one of the other rebel cells though.”

“Do you know what this brand looks like?” asked Jamilla.

Jak grimaced. “Not exactly, but I know of someone who might.”

Viona’s eyes narrowed at Jak. “Who?”

“The Royal Priest,” said Jak.

Viona scoffed, “We’ll have as much luck getting him out of the palace as we would Naem. Even if he wanted to come, which he probably won’t.”

“We might have to restrain him,” Jak admitted. “But he looked so afraid of Cain when we saw him.”

“Fear doesn’t necessarily mean he would leave. If anything, it might suggest the opposite.”

“Well then, we extract him with or without his willingness,” said Naman. “Shouldn’t be too hard. If what we know is right, he stays in the west end of the palace, and there’s only a mild demon guard there.”

“Should we really risk it for someone who could resist our help?” said Jamilla, tilting her head at her husband.

Naman turned to his wife. “Darling, if the rumors about Jak are even a tenth of what we’ve heard, then it’s imperative that we help her get her abilities back.”

“But we have our own plans, and...” she glanced at Jak, “no offense dear, but we can’t put all our hope on one person.”

Jak waved a hand to show she wasn’t offended, but Naman continued. “And how long will our tactics continue to work? We’re only here because Cain has been too fixated on those Pillars. The moment he figures them out, there will be nothing for us, even if we kill a hundred demons in the meantime.”

Jamilla pressed her lips together in a way that conceded the conversation to her husband. “I guess there’s no perfect solution here, is there?”

“I’m sorry, but no,” said Jak. “But I will promise you that if I can

speak to the Royal Priest, I will get answers. He won't have forgotten the last time we spoke." That time she had beaten him unconscious. It hadn't been pretty. Jak almost regretted it now, but it could cause him to fear her as much as he feared Cain. Sure, she didn't have her powers right now, but he didn't know that, and hopefully she could get an answer out of him before he found out.

"We will help you then," said Naman. "But it's late, and you could all use some rest. Perhaps in the morning we can discuss our plans. And I can take you to meet some of the other cells."

Jak's drooping eyelids did not protest. She rose to her feet along with Viona to follow Naman and Jamilla to another chamber. Li stayed behind, as she already lay in a makeshift cot with a blanket, and Amelia's mother was still attending to her.

They passed several rooms like the one they had just left: circular rooms with passages along the sides and running water passing through the center and various tunnels on all sides, leading to other rooms. It was a labyrinth, and Jak was not surprised that the demons had not found them yet. Naman led them down one passage then another, occasionally passing other rebels.

Finally, they arrived at a long pathway with a small trough that ran through the center, filled with clean water. It didn't reek of excrement here, at least not as much, and there was more of the makeshift rooms along the sides.

Small beds were arranged up and down the sides of the rooms, and Naman led her and Viona to a pair near the back. There were a few rebels here already getting ready for bed.

"We have visitors today," said Naman, addressing the small crowd. "This is Jak, and this is Viona, a Shadow Elf."

There were a number of murmurs that ran through the onlookers, though Jak couldn't tell if they were for her, or Viona. Probably not everyone would understand that she was *the* Jak from the rumors that had floated this far.

Naman turned to them. "It's not much, and it's not private. But the beds are dry and comfortable. And we have plenty of blankets." He indicated a small pile on one side of the space.

Jak and Viona both nodded gratefully and moved to take one of the blankets each. In all honesty, the sleeping arrangements weren't all that different than what she had grown used to. The close proximity to other sleepers almost reminded her of being back on Illadar, where sleeping that close to others was necessary to stay warm.

She spared a soft thought for Seph, the one she had slept closest to most of the time. Now that he was her husband, it seemed unfair that she would now have to sleep away from him. But she had chosen to

come, that was not in question. And it had not been Seph's place to come on this mission. Not like the time she had set out on an expedition to Mt. Knot and he had secretly decided to come without her approval. Perhaps something had changed between them. Or perhaps that odd part of him, the intuition that seemed eerily accurate at times, had let him know that this adventure was not for him. She knew she needed to hurry though. Conditions were improving back on Illadar and at least they would have shelter now, but who knew what new challenges they might face while she was gone.

She let thoughts of Seph comfort and motivate her as she readied herself for bed, climbing onto the small cot and draping the blanket above her. The bed itself was a bit scratchy, but the padding was nice, and the blanket was warm. It was certainly a step above what she had experienced in Illadar just a day before.

Viona followed suit and climbed onto the identical mattress next to Jak. They didn't say a word to each other, so Jak found her mind wandering to speculate more on what they could do to fight Cain, powerless as she was. But even that escaped her mind in a rush, as sleep quickly overcame her.

“W

e will need to provide a distraction,” said Naman. It

was the next day, and the three of them: Jak, Viona, and Li, were sitting around a table with Naman and Jamilla. A few other rebels were listening in, some trying to do so discreetly, but others leaning against the walls with their arms folded, staring straight at them. Jak didn’t mind.

“Yes, that would be best,” she said. “Do these tunnels go all the way under the palace?”

“Not like you think,” replied Naman. “The palace sits atop the river itself, which is guided by man-made troughs that go deep into the hill. The river is rough there, so they use it as a more direct source of waste disposal. These tunnels empty into that same river, so we can effectively get you under the palace. But there’s no way to get up from there, unless you’re a Telekinetic, and Cain killed all of those when he arrived.”

“So we will have to sneak in through the front doors, essentially?” asked Viona. “I could help with that.”

“We think that would be your best bet,” said Jamilla. “With your Fae abilities giving you the advantage, you could probably get in without much difficulty, assuming we can remove some of those obstacles with our distraction.”

“And what exactly is that distraction?” Jak asked.

Naman exchanged an almost excited glance with Jamilla. “At any one time there are a lot of explosives here, since a lot of eastern trade usually makes its way through the city.”

“Ah yes,” said Li with a soft smile. “One of our specialties.”

“I’m not sure I’ve seen an explosive before,” said Jak. “What exactly can it do?”

“It’s really incredible,” replied Naman, but Li spoke up before he could say more.

“I thought you would be familiar with them,” she said to Jak, “given what you did to the little village you visited, when we first met.” She gave Jak a knowing look. Jak remembered of course. As

part of a spiritual journey of sorts, the Pillar of Eternity had sent her back in time to erase all traces of Li's rebel group in the eastern nations.

"Yeah, I did that using a combination of my brands," Jak replied.

Li nodded, "well imagine what you did, but without the need for any brand at all. We create a special powder that when lit creates a fire strong enough to take down a building."

"Without brands, huh?" said Jak. She had achieved something similar, not just from the fireballs created through a combination of Telekinesis and Flamedancing, but from using her Gifter brand in the wrong way. By branding a rock, for example, with a faulty Flamedancer brand, she was able to make it explode. If these explosives could do the same without any branding, they could be quite useful indeed.

"How many of these explosives do you have?" she glanced at Naman.

The man grinned. "The demons don't pay any attention to them, so we've been slowly collecting all that we could. I'd wager we have enough to take down the entire city if we had to."

Jak felt her next breath come slowly. That much firepower could be extremely useful, but also dangerous. They would have to be careful to only destroy their targets and avoid collateral damage.

"We were planning on taking out the east wing of the palace." Jamilla chimed in. "It's close enough to Cain's living quarters to be uncomfortable for him, and it's in the opposite direction of where the Royal Priest stays."

Jak took it all in and slowly nodded. "That sounds like a good plan. Your explosives will do nothing to harm Cain. He once fought a dragon in an erupting volcano and survived. But it should be enough to anger him, and perhaps turn his attention away from what we're actually trying to do."

"There's a problem, though," said Li. "Antagonizing Cain directly risks drawing unwanted attention to the rebels." She glanced at everyone at the table, particularly Naman and his wife.

"It's a risk we're willing to take," said Naman, though Jak noted with some discomfort that Jamilla did not seem to share her husband's enthusiasm. "We would have caught his attention at some point anyway, and at least this way we're building towards something, we have a long-term plan. And if we can get that to work," he glanced at Jak, or more specifically at the brands on her arms and face, "then maybe we'll actually bear a chance against Cain when he does, inevitably, come for us."

Jak blew out a breath through tight lips. "I only wish it were less of a long-shot."

“Don’t we all,” said Jamilla, so quietly that Jak almost didn’t hear her. The remark did little to bolster her spirits.

“And what about the others?” Jak asked, fixing her eyes on Naman. “Do they share your willingness to put your rebel groups in danger?”

Naman raised his arms, as if taking in the surroundings, the sewers, the meager food rations, the stench, the darkness. “How much longer could we hold out here, honestly. With demons on patrol all the time, he will find us eventually and we would have had no chance. This way, we have one, however slim.”

“I would like to discuss it with them, just in case,” said Jak.

“I would too,” added Jamilla.

Naman considered them. “I suppose it won’t hurt. We needed to introduce you to them anyway. But I still think we should move quickly. It won’t be long before Cain activates these Pillars of Eternity and then comes looking for us.”

Odd that it was Naman trying to convince her that they stood a chance against Cain. Jak had to admit the man was right though. This was their best chance so far. And just the thought of gaining back her brands was enough to lift her spirits. There was so much she missed from those days, so much she had come to take for granted until she had lost it. What would it be like to have all that power again?

Regardless, she would not wait another moment if there was even the slightest chance that she might gain her powers back. She had to find out how to do it, even if it meant “saving” the Royal Priest from Cain.

“So assuming everyone else is on board, you provide the distraction, and Viona and I sneak into the other end of the palace.” Jak said, bringing the conversation back to the plan. “What happens then?”

“Well, the Royal Priest has a demon guard, so you will likely have to get past them.” Naman scratched at his chin.

“How many?”

“We’re not sure,” said Jamilla. “It may vary, but at least half a dozen.”

Okay, that wasn’t too bad. Jak had dealt with worse, even though she didn’t have her abilities to help her now. And with Viona’s help, they could remain invisible, which would give them all the advantage.

“We’re also not entirely sure of where in the palace they keep him,” said Naman. “We’re pretty sure it’s on that west end, but that still leaves you with at least a dozen rooms to search. And there’s always the possibility that he might not be there.”

“We’re doing this at night, right?” said Li. “The best chance of catching him there?”

"Yes, but with the explosives going off, he might be moving in a hurry. That's one disadvantage to our distraction. The demons might also escort him somewhere else on their master's orders."

"So we need to get in fast, which means we need to be ready to go the moment the explosives go off," said Jak.

Naman nodded. "Exactly. All of us will have to move fast."

"And what of the escape plan?" Li chimed in. "If something goes wrong, how can we get out."

Jak narrowed her eyes at Li. The woman knew that she wasn't coming on this one, right? Only Viona and Jak made sense. Jak knew what they were going up against best, and Viona's magic was essential to getting them in and out of the palace unseen. But she pushed that thought aside to address Li's question.

"Naman, you said there are canals that converge with the river under the palace itself?"

Naman nodded, "yes, and the water is kind of rough there. If you jumped in, you'd be swept away until you were out of the city." He hesitated and looked like he was choosing his next words carefully. "But I wouldn't necessarily advise that, since you might be underwater for long stretches of that journey where the river goes through the city's tunnels. You could drown."

"And once you're out of the city, you'd have a hard time getting back in," added Jamilla. "The city is locked down by demons."

"Okay, so make that a last resort." Jak said. "But we'll do it if we have to."

Li nodded, "Then that is what we must do."

Jak hesitated again, meeting Li's eyes. The woman still looked a sickly shade of green, and she got the feeling that the easterner would be shaking with exertion if she hadn't been sitting down already. Despite what Amelia's mother said, there was definitely something wrong with Li, and it bothered Jak that even a Healer couldn't figure out what.

"Li," she said, carefully. "You know that only Viona and I should be involved in the actual extraction, right? We can't afford to have anyone else, and you're still sick as it is."

She hated the look that Li gave her, a mixture of disappointment and hurt. Li obviously had assumed that she was coming. An awkward silence filled the chamber before Li spoke again. "Of course. I understand."

"Your talents would be much better suited for the distraction," said Jak hastily, trying to make up for the woman's disappointment. "You know more about these explosives than probably anyone here."

Li gave a casual nod. "I suppose that's true." But she didn't say anything more. Instead, she went back to eating the cooling soup she

had been given.

Jak wanted to say more, to try and comfort Li, but she couldn't think of anything.

Naman broke the tension. "I think that pretty much settles the plan then. We'll blow up part of the east wing, while Jak and Viona sneak into the palace on the west side, find the Royal Priest, and get him out as fast as possible. You'll come back the way you came, or, if something goes wrong, you have the canals to jump into, and hopefully get out of them alive."

Jak nodded. "And if I can, I'll quickly search for the Pillars of Eternity. If Cain leaves them during the distraction we might not get a better chance of taking them."

Viona looked at her sharply, but said nothing. Retrieving the Pillars of Eternity involved significantly more danger, and more time spent in the palace, which also meant that Viona would have to use her elf magic for a greater period of time.

"Can you manage it?" Jak asked Viona. The Shadow Elf nodded immediately, but she still didn't look happy about the added complication. So Jak added, "It's not our primary goal this time, and we might discover that circumstances will make it impossible. But we also can't pass up the opportunity if it comes our way."

"Yes, of course," said Viona. "I understand, you don't have to worry."

"Alright then," Jak turned to face Naman and Jamilla. "When do we start?"

T

hat night, Jak strapped on a spare set of armor that Naman's people had recovered in the city. It was mostly leather armor, as anything made of metal would make a lot of noise, which was something she didn't need while sneaking into the palace. But it would help stop a demon bite, which was exactly what they needed right now.

Though she had never worn this particular set of armor before, she couldn't help but notice how right it felt to be wearing it. The clothing brought her back to the first days when Naem had trained her on their march to Foothold. At the time, that training had been the hardest thing she'd ever done. And yet now she longed for such times again.

Her thoughts strayed once again to Naem. If Marek really was bringing him in, would they have to do this all over again to try and rescue the man? Should they consider waiting?

No, they couldn't do that. The longer they waited, the greater the chance that Cain would uncover the secrets of the Pillars of Eternity, after which he would be unstoppable. Jak had to get them back, or at the very least find a way to get her own powers back. Then she would stand at least a small chance of facing Cain directly. And right now the Royal Priest was her best hope.

They had spent the majority of the day traveling to visit the other cells in the city. The whole experience had been hard to believe. When they had first entered the city, it had seemed completely deserted save for a number of demons. But Naman had quickly shown her that there were literally hundreds in the sewers alone, split up into different corners so that if one was discovered, it would be unlikely to affect the rest of them. And only a handful knew where all the others were, Naman being one of them.

Thankfully, almost all of them unanimously agreed to go along with the plan. Most had heard about Jak, and were eager to join with her to take down Cain. In most cases, Jak kept her Void brand covered, and failed to mention that she didn't have all her powers. There wasn't much good in letting that secret out at this point. She

hated the deception, but it was necessary to ensure everyone was okay with the plan.

Viona spent some time talking to the Shadow Elves that they found scattered throughout the sewers as well. They served as a kind of spy network, warning the individual cells of any approaching danger, and even taking out the occasional demon that wandered into the sewers. None of them had lived through Vander's mutiny on Illadar, and were therefore far more eager to see Jak again. As before, Jak kept her Void brand a secret. It was much harder to deceive the Shadow Elves.

It was now evening, and it was time to put the plan in motion. Naman guided them through the sewers until they reached a crossing where they had to split up. Naman pointed down one way. "Follow this tunnel until it ends, then make a right and it will take you up to where the canals meet the river. We'll continue on this way," he waved a hand down the other passage. "Once you're outside the sewers, wait until you hear the explosion before going any further."

Jak clasped her hand with Naman's. "Good luck."

"The same to you," Naman replied, giving her hand a tight squeeze before turning to lead his people down the other tunnel. Jak and Viona remained behind, watching them go. Li spared a glance for the pair of them before she too disappeared down the tunnel with the others. Had there been something sad in her gaze? Jak hoped she hadn't offended the woman by telling her she wasn't needed, at least not with Jak and Viona. Surely Li understood that it made the most logical sense for her to remain with the others and assist with the explosives.

Jak put the problem out of her mind for now. Perhaps she could talk to Li after all of this was over, but right now she had to focus on the mission. They were here to find the Royal Priest, get him out of the palace, and possibly the Pillars of Eternity as well, all before Cain noticed.

Jak and Viona continued down their own tunnel until Jak saw white light ahead, and a rushing sound like a waterfall.

Soon they were outside, and Jak took just a moment to take a deep breath of the fresh air. She let it out slowly, feeling the cool breeze wash over her face and whip at her hair. The sewers were not a place she would miss any time soon.

The rushing sound was coming from below them now, where the tunnel emptied. Jak swallowed as she saw the tumultuous waters rushing downward and away from them. The water was white, and it disappeared down a much larger tunnel after only about a hundred yards of being exposed. Naman was right. They didn't want to fall into that if they could avoid it. Who knew if there was any air available once the water disappeared down the tunnel. And what if the rushing

current caused them to hit their heads against the stone of the man-made tunnel. They would have to be extremely lucky.

“Do we wait here for now?” Viona said in her ear.

Jak glanced upward. She could barely make out one of the spires of the palace from here. They were close. “Let’s wait a few more moments for the others to get into position, but we’ll need to move before the explosion goes off, so we can be ready to enter the palace immediately.”

Viona acknowledged her with a nod. Of course, Viona could make them both invisible and they could move at any time, but Jak didn’t want to strain the elf’s magic before it was time. They would likely remain invisible for a long while, and all of that effort could wear Viona down. So they waited for a few minutes until Jak was confident the others would be close to initiating the distraction.

“Let’s go,” she said after a short while.

Viona immediately grabbed Jak’s hand, and Jak felt a wash of power flow over her. Looking down at her body, she again saw, with some unease, that she could no longer see herself. She brought her free hand in front of her, waving it around her face, but saw nothing. Despite the many times she had done this by now, it was remarkable. Was the experience the same for Viona as well?

They proceeded up a set of access stairs that led from their smaller tunnel up the side of the canal. When they reached the top, Jak had a much clearer view of the palace. It towered over them, and Jak could see the central entrance they had used previously to get out of the palace shortly after arriving back on Earth.

This time, they moved to their left, heading towards the west side. Demons lingered here and there, but none of them did more than sniff curiously as Jak and Viona passed. They could smell something, but not enough to get a clear understanding that there were intruders walking right past them.

It occurred to Jak that maybe they didn’t even need the distraction. None of these demons had the faintest idea that they were here. Perhaps it would be relatively easy to sneak into the wooden palace and find the Royal Priest after all. But still, it wasn’t like the explosion would hurt. If it was easy now, it would be even easier once the chaos started.

Suddenly the earth shook beneath them, and an ear-splitting boom rushed over them. Jak almost let go of Viona so she could clamp her hands to her ears. A faint ringing sound hovered around both of them.

She turned to see a huge firecloud rising into the sky, and flames licking the east end of the palace. Though they weren’t close enough to get a good look, Jak could already tell that part of that side of the building was missing completely. What power these explosives had,

and with no brands involved.

Demons turned in unison to see the carnage. They screamed and growled with hideous, all-too-human sounds, before running on all fours towards the scene of the distraction. Not a one remained near Jak and Viona, other than those that were running past.

“Now’s our chance,” said Viona, bringing Jak’s attention back to the present. Yes, they had to go.

She led, holding Viona tightly by the hand until they reached a small servant’s door on their side of the palace. Quickly, they opened the door and scrambled inside before any demons could notice. Not that they would. All were focused on the explosion that had torn apart the other side of the large structure.

Once inside, Jak’s eyes took a moment to adjust. They were in a large kitchen, empty save for a few baskets of molding bread. Jak sincerely hoped they weren’t actually feeding that bread to the Royal Priest or anyone else in the palace. Surely Cain, at least, demanded something more suitable for himself. But she shrugged the thought off. This building was more of a complex, and there was probably more than one such kitchen area.

There were no demons in sight. So they continued to the other side of the kitchen and out another door. On the other side was a large hallway. Once again, there were no demons. Jak silently thanked the ancestors and Naman for doing his job. The distraction had proven itself after all. This hallway would have been hard to navigate had there been demons present.

“Naman said the Priest is likely holed up in the servants’ quarters,” Jak whispered. “We should be close.”

“I think the rooms off of this hallway are probably them,” confirmed Viona. “Let’s start looking. If you see any with demons guarding it, or with locks from the outside, that might be an indicator.”

Jak nodded before realizing that Viona couldn’t see her. So instead she gave the elf’s hand a squeeze. They tip-toed to each doorway, slowly prodding each one open as they peeked in. They were in the servant’s quarters alright, but none of them were occupied by either human or demon. When they had covered the entire hall, Jak began to worry. How long would the explosion keep Cain distracted?

They found some stairs at the end of the hall and made their way up. Jak wasn’t sure if the servant’s quarters would extend to a second floor since usually it was the nobility that preferred the upper stories. But then again, they didn’t know for sure that the Royal Priest was staying in a servant’s quarters.

The moment they reached the top of the stairs, Jak knew they were in the right place. Two demons stood on either side of a door at

the far end, unmoving. If they hadn't gone to inspect the explosion, they had to be there specifically on Cain's orders.

"That must be where the Priest is," she whispered to Viona.

"I agree," replied the Shadow Elf. "If we get close enough, we can take them out without a problem. You have the knife I gave you?"

Jak patted the spot on her belt where one of the elf's obsidian knives lay in a padded sheath. "I've got it."

"Good," Jak heard the slight sound of stone sliding against leather as Viona extracted her own knife. "There's only two of them, which means the rest might have left with the explosion, though there might be more inside. We should take care of these two first."

Jak squeezed Viona's hand and reached for the knife at her belt. Once she had it in hand, they tip-toed as close as they could to the demons without giving themselves away. One of the demons began to sniff.

In a flash of darkness, Viona lifted her Fae magic, let go of Jak's hand, and the illusion that made them both invisible vanished. The demons' eyes widened in shock as two of their enemies materialized before their eyes. But before either of them could so much as blink, Jak buried her knife to the hilt in the demon's neck, while Viona did the same. The demons didn't have a chance to scream or do more than gurgle before they fell to the floor, dead.

Viona took Jak's hand again, letting her magic activate, turning them invisible. Then slowly, Jak watched the door handle turn as if by itself, as Viona grabbed it and slowly opened the door.

There were no other demons inside. Which meant either the two were all Cain thought necessary, or the rest had gone to investigate the explosion. But huddled in one corner, his gaze fixated out a small window, as if looking to see what had happened in the explosion, was the Royal Priest.

As the door creaked while Viona opened it, the Priest shifted his gaze to look straight at them, though he could not actually see who was opening the door.

"Ahh!" He exclaimed as he caught sight of the dead demons beyond the door. "Who's there?"

Jak let go of Viona's hand, breaking the magic passing between them. In a moment, she materialized directly in front of the Royal Priest. At first, the man seemed startled to see someone appear out of nowhere. But that startlement slowly turned to fear as he realized just who it was that stood in front of him.

"You!" he said as the whites of his eyes grew more pronounced. "You're supposed to be dead! They told me you were dead."

"Unfortunately for you," said Jak. "That is not true."

The Royal Priest whimpered. Jak took a step towards him, and he

yelped and scrambled backward, stumbling over his belongings. Jak scowled. She had forgotten how much she detested this man. And now, to see him so pathetic and broken, seeing him was not something she enjoyed.

"P-p-please d-d-don't kill me," he stammered, shielding his face with his arms as she drew nearer.

"I'm not here to kill you, I'm here to rescue you, believe it or not."

He peeked at her through his upraised arms. "You, you can't take me away from *him*. He will kill me, and you, and everyone else."

"That's exactly what we're trying to avoid," said Jak. "Now will you come peacefully or will I have to drag you out of here, unconscious."

Suddenly Viona also materialized beside Jak, which was unfortunate timing, because it only caused the Priest to reel backwards with another yelp.

"I think we should knock him out and carry him," said Viona, staring down her nose at the Royal Priest. The pronouncement only caused the man to whimper even more. What a pathetic creature he had become.

"Will you come quietly?" Jak said to the man. For a moment, the Royal Priest hesitated, and Jak began to wonder if he really would come with them, despite his fear of retaliation from Cain. But before the man could say another word, both Jak and Viona tensed as voices could be heard coming down the hallway. Growing closer.

With a brief signal from Viona, Jak stepped forward and grabbed hold of the Royal Priest, holding him down with all her strength, and clamping her hand over the man's mouth. Viona followed suit, pressing herself down on the pair of them and activating her Shadow magic to render the three of them invisible.

The Royal Priest squirmed and let out a series of muffled groans, to which Jak responded by pressing her hand down harder on his mouth and whispering, "if you don't want me to beat you senseless again, you will be silent." Instantly he shut up, clearly remembering the last time he and Jak had interacted, when she had beaten him to within an inch of his life because Jak suspected he was a demon. No, he hadn't forgotten.

But the voices were still growing closer, and Jak could feel the bodies of the Royal Priest and Viona continue to tense as they drew near.

"Yes, I thought I felt some of my children die here."

Jak felt every muscle of her body go taut. That was Cain's voice.

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here was a pause before another voice spoke even closer than before. Right by the door to the room. “It looks like your Priest is gone; though I never was sure why you kept him around.”

This time, Jak’s stomach rose to her throat. She recognized the second voice too. Barely breathing, she tilted her head back and to the side to try and get a better look.

Marek and Cain were both standing in the doorway, surveying an apparently empty room. Marek looked as Jak had always remembered him, though there was a steel in his eyes that she didn’t remember. Cain was as she’d last seen him, a horrifying mass of melted flesh clinging to bones, the result of a terrible fight with a dragon.

“I’m more concerned as to why the rebels would even choose to get him out. It’s not as though he was very friendly with most.” Cain rubbed the skin hanging off his chin, apparently not the least concerned that the rebels had blown up part of his palace. Had he even gone to inspect the damage, or try to recover the perpetrators?

“Perhaps they think he can reveal more about you,” Marek suggested.

“There is nothing the Priest could reveal that would give them any advantage.” Jak squirmed as she heard that. Was it true? Or did Cain just think that because he didn’t know she was there? Perhaps the Royal Priest still held the information Jak sought about how Cain managed to resist the effects of a Void brand. It was all they had to go on.

She felt the Royal Priest squirm once again beneath her, and she put just a bit more pressure on his mouth, and her other hand on his throat. He needed a reminder that she could render him unconscious just as easily as he could try and call for help.

“Regardless,” continued Marek. “I think we can agree that the Priest was their real target, not the palace.”

“Indeed,” said Cain. “I’m calling in more of my children from distant lands. They will be here shortly and we can expand our search.”

"You're not going after them yourself?" "I can hardly be bothered as of now," Cain waved a hand dismissively. "I am close, my son. Close to revealing the secrets of the Pillars of Eternity. Perhaps with this new gift you've brought me, it might be a matter of days."

Cain waved to something that literally hovered in the air on the other side of the door. Jak hadn't noticed it before with Marek and Cain blocking the entrance. But now she got a good look at the object.

And it wasn't a 'thing' at all. It was a person, carried through the air by an act of telekinesis coming from Marek. She only now noticed the brand on his left hand glowing. But what startled her more was that she recognized the unconscious form.

The hovering figure was Naem.

Jak swallowed. There was no mistaking it. Marek and Cain had Naem in custody, which meant that Cain now had another avenue towards discovering how the Pillars worked. Naem was the only one, besides herself, who had ever successfully operated the Pillars of Eternity. Jak didn't know how Cain could use that to his advantage, but if Cain was excited about it, that only meant the rest of them should worry.

But they could do nothing right now. There was no way Jak could have grabbed Naem and retreated with both Marek and Cain there to stop her. Without her brands, she would be nothing against either.

"Perhaps I can lead the search for you," said Marek. "I'm sure I could find them with little effort."

Cain waved a hand in dismissal and retreated through the door and down the hall. "Do what you will, though I want you back in Skyecliff within the month at least. We must maintain our hold."

"I will uncover the hidden base of these rebels long before then," said Marek, a sly smile growing on his lips as he too turned away from Jak, facing his master down the hall. "And I'll learn what exactly they wanted with the priest."

"See that you do," said Cain, his voice fainter, coming from further down the hall. "I'll take your gift, and work with him as I see fit. As a reward for your services, you may do whatever you want to the remainder of the people hiding in this town."

"My thanks," said Marek with a small bow. He was still standing in the door frame, though facing away from them. There was a pause as Cain's footsteps grew fainter until Jak couldn't hear them any longer. But still, Marek remained standing in the doorway. He turned to survey the room one last time, pausing to take it all in. Or at least, that's what Jak hoped he was doing.

Finally, Marek turned and marched away leaving them still hidden under Viona's shroud, the three of them barely managing to breathe.

Once enough time had passed, Viona whispered, "we should leave

now."

"Okay," said Jak. "But I'd like to see where they took Naem."

"We can't take that risk," said Viona, her tone urgent. "He's likely wherever Cain is, and we just barely managed to avoid them as it is."

Jak grit her teeth. Viona was right, but she had to know where Naem would be held, and if there was any chance of getting him out. Chances were, they would find the Pillars of Eternity in the same place as well, but Cain would be there too. He would be the one to conduct whatever sick experiments he had planned for Naem and the Pillars. And yet there was no way they could spy on Cain with the Royal Priest in tow. Viona had the right idea. They had to leave first.

Closing her eyes, she let out a breath. "Then let's get out of here."

Viona gave her hand a squeeze, probably grateful that Jak wasn't arguing the point. Then she felt the woman's weight lift from behind, and Jak followed suit, dragging the Royal Priest with her.

"If you try to resist us," she whispered in his ear. "I will make sure our last meeting was a mere prelude compared to what's coming for you."

A slight whimper was the only answer she got, especially considering she couldn't see the man's face, thanks to Viona's magic. But it was enough, she kept a tight grip on the man with one arm, letting Viona guide her with the other.

They stepped out, passed the two dead demons that had once guarded the room, shuffled down the hall and out the way they had come. Slowly, they opened the kitchen door that they had taken to get in. It opened with a soft creak, and the three of them slipped out as quietly as they could manage.

"Shadow Fae!" called a voice from in front of them.

Immediately the three of them froze in place, and Jak's heart froze as she realized who had spoken.

Marek stood several paces ahead of them, facing the door they had just come through.

"I know you're there," he said. "I saw the door open, and I felt a presence in the room upstairs. You're lucky my master was too distracted to notice. You have the Royal Priest now, don't you?"

A slight tug of Viona's hand indicated to Jak that they should take another path and circle around. If Marek knew they were here, they had lost a considerable advantage, but that didn't mean he knew exactly where they were. They could sneak ahead.

"I don't know what you want with him," Marek continued. "And I'm not sure I care. But one does not simply attack my master and get away with it. Show yourself or I will destroy you here and now."

Could he do that? He didn't know where they were. Perhaps he could destroy the entire area including them in the process. But that

would also eliminate the Royal Priest, and was that something Marek was willing to risk?

They were farther away now, and Marek was now facing the opposite direction, still looking towards the open door to the kitchen. But perhaps they could in fact, get away.

When suddenly, the Royal Priest squirmed as hard as ever and for a moment, broke Jak's grasp. "Help me, young master!" he yelled. Marek's face instantly locked onto the Royal Priest, his eyes flashing. Jak leapt forward to try and grab hold of the Priest, but just as she did so, her hand slipped out of Viona's, and for a split second, she became visible.

Marek's eyes widened slowly as he caught sight of Jak. "You," was all he said, before Jak thumped the Royal Priest on the head, causing him to sway and lose his balance. Viona was there to catch him, but not before hurling her dagger at Marek. The weapon caught Marek dead center in the chest. He staggered backward, visibly hurt, though not as much as he should have been, not as much as a normal human. With a wince, he grabbed the hilt of the dagger and pulled it out of himself.

Jak didn't pause to see what happened next. Together with Viona, she grabbed the Royal Priest, and the elf made them all invisible again.

They ran.

A burst of fire scorched the spot where they had last stood, but that did not cause them to slow. Using every muscle in her body, Jak threw herself forward. They couldn't move very fast, carrying the Royal Priest, but they also could not leave him behind. There would not be a second chance to get him out of the palace. This was the only way.

"We're not far from the canals," shouted Viona as they went. She no longer bothered shushing her voice. They were already making enough noise as they ran anyway. Jak didn't even look to see if Marek was in pursuit.

Jak didn't reply, only ran as fast as she could, following Viona's lead towards the canals. There was no chance they would flee the normal way at this point. Marek would be right on their tail, and they would need an unconventional method of escape if they wanted any chance of getting away for good. Fighting wasn't an option, which only left the possibly deadly avenue of leaving their fate in the hands of a rushing river.

Jak heard the roar of the river and the canals before she saw it. But it wasn't long before they approached the entrance to the canals, the open pit that saw nothing but white water below. The Royal Priest finally moved in their hands, waking from Jak's blow to the head.

He yelled as he caught sight of canals. "What do you think you're doing?" he screamed, and tried to wrench himself out of their grip. For just a moment, Viona lost control of her magic as she tried to suppress the Priest. The three of them became visible.

Jak glanced back to see Marek coming for them. There was blood covering his chest, but from what she could tell, the wound had already healed itself. How did people like Marek and Cain have such healing powers? Perhaps the Priest would know more about the brands that Cain used. But right now, they had to worry about Marek, who had spotted them in the instant that Viona's magic had failed. He launched himself into the air and flew towards them.

He reached out a hand, and Jak felt her heart nearly stop as a force of Telekinesis wrapped itself around her. There was no way she could break hold of that, not without her Strength brand at least. She looked around to see Viona and the Royal Priest in the same grip. They were caught.

Suddenly something thudded into Marek with a burst of light. An explosion not unlike the one that burned down part of the palace, but much smaller. It left Marek's face half burned and red. He yelled and Jak felt the telekinetic grip break so she had the use of her arms and hands again.

"Into the water!" cried a voice. Jak looked to see Li joining them. She lit something in her hand with a small flame and threw it at Marek. It exploded again, catching Jak's old friend off guard, and causing him to stumble.

"Li, what are you..." Jak began.

"No time, jump," replied Li. The woman extracted another explosive and threw it down at Marek's feet. But instead of exploding, this one let out a massive amount of smoke, hiding them all from view.

Jak didn't waste any more time. She grabbed the Royal Priest and leapt over the edge, down to the waters below. The Royal Priest screamed as they fell, and Jak briefly saw Viona and Li follow her over the edge just before she hit the water.

The cold washed over her like an icy blanket. Her chest tightened and she struggled to reach the surface. She was vaguely aware that she still held onto the Royal Priest, and the thought caused her to increase her grip. She could not lose hold of that man, even if it killed her.

Blessedly, she reached the surface and took a huge breath, as did the Priest coming up beside her. But that was about all they could manage. The fast-flowing water swept them away, directly towards a tunnel where all of the water disappeared. If they stayed at the surface, they would bash their heads against the stone.

Jak dived down, pulling the Priest with her. Darkness surrounded them as they passed into the tunnel, the current still carrying them away as fast as anything Jak had before experienced. What she wouldn't give for a Water Fae right now, someone to help control the current and keep them from dying. But there were no Water Fae here, so Jak just had to hope that they didn't crash too hard into a rock, or meet some other untimely end.

She tried to swim upward, but the current made that all but impossible. Besides, she wasn't even sure there was anything above them but the stone of the man-made tunnel the river was passing through. But she was starting to run out of air.

S truggling to hold her breath, Jak thrashed about, trying to find something to hold onto, or some way to swim upward to catch a small breath. But there was nothing. They were still moving fast enough that there was no way Jak could have held onto anything if she tried.

They were going down, though, and Jak thought she could feel the current slackening just a little bit. Perhaps they were nearly through the worst of it, and maybe there would be a place where she could come up for air.

Just as she thought it, something changed about the water around them. It felt more...open, less confined. There was less pressure forcing her down its path. On a hunch, she tried once again to swim upward. Should she let go of the Priest? He would only weigh her down, and perhaps....

Her head broke the water and she gasped for air, taking two enormous breaths of the best air she had ever tasted. With a heave, she pulled the Royal Priest up as well, who was also trying to reach the surface. His head popped above the water and he too gasped for air, coughing and sputtering. "Are you insane?" he managed to stammer.

Jak didn't respond, but turned to see where the water was taking them. The force of the river was definitely waning, and Jak could see calmer water ahead of them, leading east. This had to be the river that led all the way to Skyecliff.

They were already outside of Tradehall. The tunnel must have pushed them through faster than she thought. She was just glad that she'd managed to hold her breath for all of that. And the Royal Priest too. They could have easily lost him in the process, and therefore lose the entire point of their mission.

They swam to a slight inlet in the river, and Jak managed to find some footing, pushing herself towards the edge, and finally grabbing hold of some reeds along the bank, the first plant life she had seen since arriving. Both she and the Royal Priest came to a halt.

As they extracted themselves from the river, Jak turned to see Li

and Viona pop their heads out of the water further up the river. They were still alive. Jak breathed a sigh of relief and waved to them as they approached. Both managed to see her and work their way to the edge of the river so they could get out the same way Jak had done.

Thankfully for Jak, the Royal Priest did not try to escape, though had he tried, Jak wasn't sure she had the strength to restrain him again. But he seemed equally exhausted, and lay back against the grass that bordered the river. Jak almost felt like doing the same. Viona was already on her feet, but Li was crawling in the grass on all fours, looking like she was about to vomit.

Jak knelt next to the woman. After all, Li hadn't been well, and after everything that had just happened, it couldn't have helped.

Li's body was shaking hard, and Jak reached out a hand. "Li, are you alright?" Was the woman having some kind of seizure? Jak had seen such things happen in the camp at Illadar, when people were really close to death.

"I'm fine, I'm better than fine!" Li exclaimed. The woman turned to face Jak, and she realized that Li wasn't shaking with a seizure. She was laughing, and tears of joy streamed down her already wet face.

What on Earth was going on? "Li, what do you mean?" Jak didn't wipe the concern off her face.

"I'm finally alive," said the woman. "On Illadar, and in that city, there was hardly any life. No plants, no trees, nothing." Li ran a hand through the grasses beneath her. "Here there is life."

Jak narrowed her eyes at Li. It was hard to tell in the moonlight, but Li no longer looked sick. Her skin still had that pale-green hue, but there was something different about it now. It was no longer the sickly green of death, but something more vibrant.

Something clicked in the back of Jak's mind. "Li, are you able to...sense the life around us?"

"Yes, I can feel it like I've never felt before," said Li. "It is all around us, though I never realized it until we left the city. There was almost nothing living inside that place, or on Illadar."

"There were people there?" said Viona, staring at both Li and Jak in confusion.

"People are a different kind of life, one that takes instead of gives," said Li, running her hands through the grass. "This is true life, the life that makes all other life."

"Li," said Jak, finally voicing her thought. "I think you might be a Fae."

Viona tilted her head back in comprehension, and Li turned to face Jak. There were still tears in her eyes. "Is this what being a Fae is like? This wonderful awareness of my element, of the world around me? This feeling that I have never been whole before now?"

"Yes," said Viona, in a tone of finality. "That's exactly what it's like."

"I've heard others speak of it that way as well." Jak confirmed.

Li closed her eyes and squeezed out another tear. "Then I could not be happier."

Jak glanced to one side as the Royal Priest began scrambling to his feet, his face still pale and awash with fear. "Where do you think you're going?"

"They'll follow us here, we're exposed." He said in a rush, his voice pitched higher than usual. He quivered as he looked at Li, his fear apparent, though likely overridden by his fear of Cain.

Jak stared away at Tradehall on its hill. It was true, they were exposed out here. The area around Tradehall was nothing but open fields for miles. Anyone coming for them would spot their party instantly. They should have thought that one through when forming their escape plan. Besides, how were they supposed to get back into the city if it was as heavily guarded as they supposed. And Marek knew she was here now, which meant he and Cain would not rest until she was found. But they still had Viona.

"Viona can keep us hidden," said Jak, glancing over at the Shadow Elf. "Are you still up to it?"

Viona winced. "Maybe, but keeping four of us invisible will be much harder. I might not be able to keep it up for long. If we have to stay that way from here all the way back into the city..." she trailed off and put out her arms as if to say she didn't know what could happen.

Jak bit her lip. "Demons will be coming for us soon. Perhaps if you can do it for as long as it takes for them to search and leave."

The Royal Priest squealed. "They're coming!" he pointed away towards Tradehall. Jak squinted in that direction. Yes, she could see several dark shapes rapidly closing the distance between them. "Viona, we have to act now."

Viona didn't complain, but extended a hand to Jak, who also grabbed the Royal Priest with her other hand. Viona reached out for Li, who left her place in the grass, albeit reluctantly to hold the elf's hand. Once they were all linked, Viona shrouded them in her magic.

It wasn't perfect, and Jak knew it immediately. She thought she could almost make out the slightest shadow where Viona and Li were standing. That wasn't good. If the demons found them, they would be right back where they started. And this time maybe Cain would come too.

She glanced back toward the city, and swallowed as she spotted a dark spot hovering in the air, growing closer. That had to be either Marek or Cain. What would they do now that they knew she was

here? Was there any hope left?

“Everyone, get down on the ground,” Li whispered to them. “I think I might have another solution. Maybe.”

“Maybe?” Jak whispered back.

“Just trust me, there’s something here I can tap into. Some kind of instinct.”

That might have something to do with some new Fae ability, which was enough for Jak. She knelt, feeling the Royal Priest and Viona do the same on either side of her. Then she lay down so that the grass rose higher than her body.

The Royal Priest twitched, and started to scramble back to his feet. Jak forced him down with a sharp tug, and was about to ask him if he wanted to be knocked out again, when she saw what had spooked the clergyman. The grasses around them were growing taller, some were growing thicker. New plants were shooting up from the ground at incredible speeds, large vine-looking plants that wound around them. Some were covered in sharp thorns, the size of sewing needles, though none of those came close enough to touch them.

“Li,” Viona voiced in awe. “This is remarkable.”

“Let me concentrate,” said Li through what sounded like gritted teeth. “I’m not sure of my limits here, but it takes effort.”

They shut up, letting Li do her work. Viona was right, it was remarkable. The vines twisted so they were forming almost a solid wall around them, though from what Jak could see, they were also extending to all sides, forming several pathways that spread in every direction. Jak nodded as she understood. It wouldn’t do for one strange patch of plant life to stand solitary on the planes. Marek or Cain would spot that instantly and know they were hiding. But this way, there were vines and tall grasses all around them. It would be much easier to assume they were just a runaway plant of some kind, not something completely new, created just in that moment.

The Royal Priest let out a muffled sound, and Jak turned to see a vine wrapping itself around where the Priest’s face had to be, though Jak couldn’t exactly tell since Viona’s magic was still at work. But it looked like Li was smart enough to gag the Priest using the vines. Clever.

Small flowers bloomed on the tips of the vines that surrounded Jak. It was simple, but one of the most beautiful displays of color Jak had ever seen. But her pleasure was short lived. It didn’t take long before Li ceased building her labyrinth of vines and thorns. “They’re here,” Li whispered as explanation for why she stopped.

Jak held her breath. Yes, she could hear the sounds of demons nearby, sharp, panting breaths and the occasional growl. They were close, some were even sniffing the air. Hopefully they wouldn’t be

able to find them by scent alone.

As if in response to her thought, a terrible odor swept through the mass of vines that hid them. She almost gagged but realized what was happening. Li was still managing to influence the life around them by having the plants give off various odors and pollens. It was throwing the demons off their scent.

But the demons were still there, prowling right outside their small enclosure. One let out a soft yelp. Perhaps the thorns on some of the vines had pricked the ruined human. The yelp turned to a low wail, before Jak felt a definite thud as the demon fell. Could the thorns be poisonous as well? Jak reminded herself never to get on Li's bad side again.

A few more yelps sounded from other demons, some near, some farther out. Apparently Li's network of vines extended far enough away in many directions. Like before, the demons fell to the ground, most likely dead, though Jak could not get up and check for certain.

"What is this?" said a voice. Jak immediately quieted her breathing once again. It was Marek. "I haven't seen a vine like this before."

A sharp intake of breath signaled Marek too had been pricked.

"Poisonous too," said Marek, though his voice held no sign of weakness. Whatever healing brands Cain had given him, it must have stopped the flow of poison. "All of you, go," he said, likely speaking to the demons. "We can't afford to lose too many of you until my master's reinforcements arrive. The girl will be back, and when she arrives, we'll be ready for her."

So they were waiting for Jak then. Where was Cain? Shouldn't he be personally invested in finding her? He wouldn't give up on the search so easily. Or had Marek not managed to tell him yet. Cain could see through the demon's eyes, but only when he was concentrating on it. Perhaps he truly hadn't seen what Marek had. Not yet, anyway. Marek would surely tell him in the first available moment.

They waited a long time, long enough that Jak almost thought she could see the air lightening around them, even through the plant growth. The sun would be rising soon.

"We have to go," said Li, still in a hushed whisper. "We must get back to Tradehall before the day comes."

"The gates will be blocked," said Viona.

"Then we go over the wall," said Li. "Far enough away from any demon guards."

"How are we supposed to do that," replied Viona. "The walls of Tradehall extended upward for a hundred feet. There's no way we could scale it without axes to stick into the wood..." she hesitated, "oh

wait.”

“Exactly, just leave it to me,” said Li.

The vines surrounding them retreated as fast as they had come, the sharp thorns seeming to retract into their vines like claws. As Jak rose to her feet, she couldn’t help but stare, slack-jawed at the writhing tangle of plant life all around them. Li really had created a massive labyrinth of the stuff. No wonder Marek hadn’t been able to pinpoint exactly where they were.

They walked back towards Tradehall, though this time they circled around the back. There were a few demons lurking around the place. Jak handed Viona her dagger, since the Shadow Elf had previously lost it when she threw the weapon at Marek, and it didn’t take long for her to dispatch the few demons they came across.

Li also seemed to have weapons of a sort. Two vines had wrapped around her arms like snakes, the tips sporting more of those long poison-tipped needles. To Jak’s surprise, the needles could even shoot forward, embedding themselves in the flesh of an unfortunate demon. The poison worked fast.

“We have to hurry,” said Jak. “Cain might feel the deaths of his demons again, and come looking for us.” She hoped that wasn’t the case. Perhaps Cain wouldn’t notice since he mentally controlled thousands of demons. Though he had noticed when they killed the demons guarding the Royal Priest. But perhaps that was only because he was specifically guiding them to remain with the Priest while the others went to inspect the explosion, meaning his attention had been more acute.

They finally arrived at the wall, and Li put her arms to the ground, concentrating. More vines slowly rose, twisting their way up the side of the felled trees that made up the walls of Tradehall.

“I hope none of you mind climbing.”

T

hey didn't protest, not even the Royal Priest, who had remained quiet for most of the journey. Jak hoped that meant he had given up, and was simply going along with them for now. But she would have to watch him carefully once they were inside the city again.

Jak grabbed ahold of the nearest vine, and tested her weight on it. It didn't seem to budge very far, so she put one foot against the wall and pulled herself up.

It didn't take very long for her muscles to protest. It was a long climb, and she had no way to rest until she reached the top. So she focused on putting one arm ahead of the other, and pulling with all her strength, such as it was. This would have been so much easier with her brands.

By the time she reached the top, the vines had already extended down the other side. She didn't see any demons nearby, but with the rising sun causing an ever-increasing glow to the east, she didn't want to wait around.

Climbing down the other side was considerably easier. The vines were smooth and allowed Jak to simply slide down them without too much difficulty. Her legs hit the dirt beneath within a matter of seconds. The Royal Priest was right behind her, though he was grumbling the entire way. Behind him came Viona, and finally Li, who almost seemed to flow with the vegetation she had...created? Grown? Jak wasn't sure exactly how Li's powers worked. She'd have to ask her about them later. But for right now she was grateful to have Li along.

"Can I just say, I'm glad you ditched the others and came to help rescue us," said Jak as Li's feet connected with the ground.

Li turned to survey the city around them, and shivered. "I did not know how much it would affect me, being in a place without plant life. I can feel it even now, the death and destruction in this city. Nothing lives here but demons and the humans who remain." She glanced down at the two vines she had wrapped around her forearms. "We will have to revitalize this place."

"Right now we need to hurry," said Viona. "We need to get back to

the sewers.”

Jak nodded, “And not just any sewer entrance either. I don’t think I could find my way back except by the route we’re already familiar with, and that’s on the other side of the city.”

They clasped hands, the Royal Priest going along with it again, as before. Viona activated her magic and the four of them became invisible. Well, mostly. Jak could still make out the slightest shadow around each of them. Viona’s magic had its limits. But it was enough that no demon who wasn’t close and looking straight at them would notice anything.

“What are you going to do to me?” The Royal Priest said after a while. It was the first thing he’d ever said to them in a calm voice.

“You needn’t worry,” Jak said, keeping her voice down so as not to attract any passing demons. “We’re not here to hurt you. You’ll have enough food, water, and other provisions. We just want information.”

“Ah,” said the Priest, finally understanding. But he didn’t ask what would happen if he refused, or what information they wanted. Chances were, he already had an idea that it had something to do with his interactions with Cain. Instead he said, “you’ve lost your brand abilities, haven’t you?”

Jak winced. She knew this would come out eventually. After all, with all her old powers she could have easily taken out all the demons, possibly even Marek himself. And climbing over the wall would have been a far easier chore.

“Just keep moving,” she said.

Jak wasn’t comfortable with the time it took to finally find the entrance to the sewers that they had first discovered upon their initial arrival. Even once they entered, it took them some time to figure out how they had proceeded the first time. They had to double back not once but three times before finding the correct route. It was only made easier by the fact that Viona dropped her magic, so they could see each other again.

But soon enough they found the larger sewer caverns and it didn’t take long after that to reach the pathways where Naman, Jamilla, and the other rebels stayed.

“You made it!” said Naman as they approached. “We were worried. We heard some kind of commotion, but weren’t sure if you were captured or managed to escape.”

“We were forced to jump into the river,” said Jak. “We’ve been making our way back ever since.”

They sat down while Naman brought them all some soup and Jak recounted what happened since they had last seen each other. She told them of the unexpected encounter with Marek, of their escape, and the revelation that Li was in fact a Fae.

"Incredible," said Jamilla, staring at Li. "So your powers have something to do with nature?"

"It would seem so," said Li. "Which explains why I felt sick in this city, and before on Illadar. There is no life here."

"And that also explains why Raine could find nothing wrong with you," said Naman. "Well, twice welcome. We are honored to have the aid of not only one, but two Fae."

"What are we going to do with this one?" said one of the other rebels, waving a hand at where the Royal Priest sat. They all looked to Naman, their leader, but the Priest looked at Jak.

Jak turned to meet Naman's eyes. "He should be kept under guard, but I think he won't give us any trouble. He should have the same rations and amenities that the rest of us have."

Naman nodded, then with a wave of his hand, he ordered the other rebels to take the Royal Priest away. Two of them grabbed the Priest by the arms, though not roughly, to guide him to a place where he could stay.

"You have the visage of my master's highest servant." The Priest said, looking at Naman and Jamilla. "May you be blessed for your relation."

Jamilla frowned, but Naman waved his hand again, and the rebels continued to take him away.

"I'll visit you soon," Jak called out. The Priest didn't respond, but he met her eyes, and Jak thought she saw something there. His attitude had changed since she'd first extracted him from the palace. She could only hope it was a good change.

"Do you think he will cooperate?" said Naman once he was out of earshot.

"I don't know," said Jak, staring off at where the guards had taken the Priest. "He and I have not exactly had the best history. He tried to kill me once."

"And yet now you rescued him. That has to make him think twice." Jamilla folded her arms.

Jak tilted her head back and forth in uncertainty. "Perhaps, but that's assuming he wanted to be rescued."

"What was that he said about us being related to Cain's highest servant?" Jamilla asked.

Jak winced. "He...was talking about Marek. He's here, now. I didn't mention it before, but he was the one who chased us out of the city down the river."

"Broken brands," said Jamilla in a hushed tone, bringing her hands to her chest. Naman remained stone faced.

"I told you before, what you knew of Marek is gone. He's been perverted by Cain, and would kill you if he got the chance." Though

Jak couldn't help but remember how easily Marek had given up in his search of the plains outside of Tradehall. That had just been because of Li's poisonous plants, right?

"She's right, Jamilla," said Naman. "We can't expect..."

"I know," Jamilla cut in. "We have no reason to doubt what Jak is saying. But...I can't help but wonder if he would somehow react differently if he saw us, knew that we were here."

"I would not take that risk," said Jak. "He saw me and tried to kill me. And now that he knows I'm here, I have no doubt that he and Cain will be doubling their efforts to find you. You won't be safe here for long."

"So what do we do?" asked Naman. His face looked...tired. He was genuinely asking Jak for advice. Before that attitude would have unnerved her, that someone would put so much faith in her advice, especially when she didn't have all her brands. But after all that business on Illadar, she didn't mind as much. There was something about her that people respected, that they turned to when there was no hope. She could only try her best to be worthy of that hope.

"We start by talking to the Royal Priest," she said.

“S

ee this?” Jak pointed at the back of her right palm where her Void brand lay. It was about an hour later, and she sat across from the Royal Priest who was eating some of the same soup Jak had been offered earlier. “You were right. I don’t have access to any of my brands anymore, and it’s because of this. Marek gave it to me several months ago.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” said the Royal Priest quietly. “We’ve never encountered someone like you or like my master who could bestow more brands on a person, but if one of them were to brand someone with a Void brand, I would expect it to negate that person’s powers.”

“So how does he negate the Void brand. You have a Void brand, but it doesn’t work on Cain.”

The Royal Priest’s eyebrows furrowed, “How do you know that?”

“I overheard you a few days ago,” Jak confirmed. “We came through one of those portals Cain opened, though you couldn’t see us.”

The Royal Priest’s eyes widened. “So they *were* going somewhere.”

“To Illadar,” said Jak.

“Ah, I’ve heard of this from the teachings of that young preacher. But what exactly is Illadar?”

Jak pressed her lips together. But she supposed it wouldn’t hurt to tell the man. “It was prophesied as a place of peace, a completely new planet where humans and Fae can live in harmony together. Though I suppose that’s not something you would welcome.”

The Royal Priest scowled, “I don’t know what to think anymore. Not after everything I’ve seen with Cain. He forced me to serve him. Made me his slave. I told him everything I knew.”

Jak grimaced. The pain in the Priest’s voice was unmistakable. “I’m sorry.”

“Cain only confirmed what I thought I knew, that all those with more than one brand are abominations. You, with all your brands, have killed and beaten many.” He looked intensely into Jak’s eyes as

he said it, and Jak could still see a hint of fear there. After holding her gaze for a moment, he looked back down at his soup before continuing. “The fae are unnatural, and not meant to exist. But then Cain appeared. He wanted you all exterminated. How was I to rectify that in my mind? Were both my enemies also enemies of each other? And then you came, and took me away from that place. You’ve given me food, and shelter...”

His face was such a contorted mixture of confusion and pain that Jak stepped in. “Perhaps it’s best not to dwell too much on picking sides. That’s a discussion for another time, and I know a few people who would love to pick apart the philosophical side of what you’re dealing with. But for now, maybe it would be better to focus on the one person you know is your enemy. We need to defeat Cain.”

His eyes started to look frantic, and he began to tremble. “I don’t...I don’t think he can be stopped.”

“You may know something we need. Once again, how does Cain negate the Void brand.”

The Royal Priest hesitated, and his eyes narrowed as if he was trying to remember something. “He has other brands, some we haven’t discovered before. One of them activated when I first tried to use a Void brand on him.” He shivered at the memory.

“What did it look like?” Jak leaned in. Eager to discover something that could help her.

“I...” he looked around, as if searching for something to write with. The floor was stone, so he couldn’t draw it in dirt.

“Can someone get me a piece of parchment and some charcoal!” Jak called back to the guards who stood just outside of the room. Well it was more of an alcove, really. One of the guards nodded in acknowledgment and retreated to find what Jak was looking for.

“This brand,” Jak turned her attention back to the Priest, “Do you have any idea what it takes to create it? To brand it?” “I’m not sure I understand,” he said, confused.

“Each brand usually requires some kind of focus, some additional thoughts that you have to use in order to make it work properly. Like Flamedancing requires you to think of literal dancing. Or the Healing brand requires you to think of completion.”

“I have no idea what would work there,” said the Royal Priest. “I only saw it light up when I tried to use my brand against him.”

Jak fought down her frustration. They would need to know what the brand required before it would work. But they could still, potentially get past that. If they knew what the brand looked like, all she would need is a Gifter to try it over and over again until they got it right. They could brand strips of leather which Jak could then tie around her wrist, which would hopefully create the effect they

wanted. If it worked, theoretically she would get her powers back. Then she could brand herself with the newfound brand, so she would never have to worry about the effects of her Void brand again.

The guard returned with some parchment in hand, and a stick of charcoal. Jak snatched it from the man and gave it to the Priest. “Here, see if you can draw it.”

The Priest took the parchment and charcoal, carefully, then placed it on the ground and began to draw.

The brand he drew was somewhat similar to the Void brand. But whereas the Void brand was three circles placed within each other, this one was a single circle with something like a four-pointed star in the center, and then another circle within the star.

When he was finished, the Royal Priest handed the parchment to Jak, who took it eagerly, studying the markings. “You’re sure this is what it looks like? You didn’t miss anything?”

The Royal Priest nodded, “I’m sure. I wouldn’t forget it.”

Jak kept her eyes locked on the markings. Then she stood. “We have to get this to a Gifter, straight away.” She began walking away, before remembering to turn look back at the Priest. “Thank you,” she said.

The Priest acknowledged her with a nod, before Jak turned back and rushed to find Naman.

The man was right where she left him, talking with his wife in the large circular chamber that marked the entrance to their little hideout.

“Naman,” she said immediately upon entering. “You said there was a Gifter among you? Like a different rebel cell?”

“Uh, yes,” he said, a little surprised at her suddenness. “Cain wiped out most of the Gifters the moment he arrived. But there was at least one man who survived, that we know of. There aren’t any with us. We already have brands.”

Jak didn’t skip a beat. “I need to find him immediately.”

Naman nodded slowly, “I’m not sure which cell he’s in, but we do have an appointed meeting place,” Naman continued, “I’m scheduled to meet with all the leaders tomorrow. We check in every so often to coordinate our plans. This time I was going to update them on our attack. I could take you there, and one of them would know which cell the Gifter is in.”

Jak’s shoulders slumped. A whole day? She needed to see this Gifter now, immediately. It could mean the difference between defeat at Cain or Marek’s hand, and getting everyone out of there safely. If she had her brands back, she could easily rescue Naem. She might even have a chance at getting the Pillars of Eternity back. Then she could build a portal and everyone could escape the city and go back with them to Illadar.

But then again, it was just one day. It wasn't likely that Marek or Cain would find them in that amount of time, not in these sewers. The tunnels down here were too complicated.

"Very well," she said. "I'd like to go with you if I can, then maybe return with the leader of the other cell."

Naman nodded, "I think they would probably be fine with that."

"..." Jak looked around feeling suddenly awkward. "Guess I'll get some sleep, then."

Naman smiled as she left, but thoughts were racing inside Jak's head. She wasn't sure she could sleep if she tried. Besides, it was morning outside. Though she had been up all night, and it certainly felt like night down in these torch-lit sewers, she was going to need sleep to recover, or at the very least pass the time.

She turned a corner to find Li seemingly hugging a wall. The sight was so odd that Jak stopped in her tracks. "What are you doing?"

"I'm letting life grow down here," said Li. Only then did Jak noticed that Li wasn't hugging the wall, her hands were connected to tiny vines and leaves like ivy, spreading out from the wall in all directions. They weren't the large and deadly looking plants like the ones Li had used to fend off the demons. These were beautiful in the way they coated the sewer walls.

"These will help us breathe better, down here," said Li, almost purring with pleasure as she communicated with the plants. "They will freshen the air."

"That's...that's incredible," said Jak, and she meant it. "What other things can you make out of your plants?"

"They're not mine, and I don't create them." Li closed her eyes. "I merely communicate with them. They're eager to return to this city, to heal it. Though they still feel pain, pain at what Cain did to them when he arrived, when he and his demons destroyed life in the city."

Jak could already smell a sweeter aroma coming off the vines, something like freshly cut grass. Li was right, it did make the air seem cleaner.

"Well keep it up," she said. "I'll try to spread the word of what you're doing, just so no one wonders. But I think we could all use the fresher air."

"And the early warning system," added Li.

"What do you mean?"

"When I'm communicating with them, I can feel what they feel. If I can extend these vines throughout the sewers, maybe even throughout the city, then I'll have a clear idea of the whereabouts of every demon and human, based on what the vines tell me."

Jak hesitated, "you'd know where every human is?"

"I think so."

Jak tucked that away in her mind. That kind of awareness would definitely be useful if they were somehow about to be discovered. But it could also tell her where all the other rebels cells were located. Not that it would matter at this point, since she would meet the leader of one of the other cells the very next day. But still, information was important, and Li could very well be the key to everything they needed to know in the city. The perfect spy network, even more efficient than Shadow Elves. What would Viona think of this?

Jak left Li to her ministrations and returned to her small cot further on. Viona was there, talking to some of the others. There were many who were eager to hear more about Illadar, and the Fae. As Jak approached, many looked in her direction with a form of awe on their faces. Jak sighed. She hoped they didn't get too excited about her just yet. She still had to find a way to get her powers back if they wanted to stand any chance against Cain.

Viona glanced at Jak, but continued her story. She was talking about the formation of Illadar now, which explained why so many of them were looking at Jak like they'd never seen her before.

Jak ignored them and lay down on her small cot, listening as Viona told them of the experience of linking with Jak as she funneled all that magic into the creation of an entire world.

"I've never felt so much a part of something, a small part, but an essential part." Viona was saying. "The power and energy that ran through me, it was like nothing I ever experienced."

Jak smiled softly to herself. She'd never heard Viona talk about that day. She wondered if it had been the same for all of the Fae. Had even Vander felt that way? Or had he interpreted the experience differently. What would Viona say when she got to that part of the story, to where Vander, her leader, turned against the humans and nearly killed several of them, including Jak?

But she didn't get a chance to find out. To her surprise, she was a lot more tired than she had previously expected. Her last thought was focused on the charcoal drawing of the new brand that she carried. She had to find a Gifter. She had to.

S

he awoke some time later, though she couldn't quite tell how long she'd slept, being in the sewers. Upon waking her mind was instantly alert and refreshed. It felt wonderful! That must have been one of the most rejuvenating nights she had ever had since before she lost her Sleeplessness brand. As her mind caught up with the events of the past few hours, excitement flooded back into her. All she had to do was find a Gifter and maybe she could have her powers back. That thought alone was enough to bring her rapidly to her feet.

She found herself momentarily distracted at what she saw next. The entire room where they slept was covered in small vines and their leaves. Li had really put in some good work the night before. Jak took a deep breath and could almost feel the air reaching into her lungs and flooding her body with a pleasurable tingle. No wonder she had slept so well the night before.

There was a small trickle of fresh water from a canal nearby, which she used to wash her face and freshen up a bit, before heading to find Naman. The old Riverbrook storekeeper's Sleeplessness brand kept him from needed sleep. So he was likely still guarding their entrance and coordinating activities with the other rebels.

Indeed, she found him playing a game of cards with his wife and two others. He paused as Jak grew closer.

"Oh good, I was just about to come and wake you. We'll be leaving within the hour."

Within the hour? Naman said they were going to visit the leaders of the other rebel cells the next day. Though now that she was paying attention, she noticed that all the walls in the large room were also covered in the vines. Li couldn't have done that in a short amount of time. "How long was I asleep?" she asked.

"Nearly eighteen hours," said Jamilla with a slight smile. "We decided you'd been through a lot, and thought we'd let you rest."

Eighteen hours? So much time wasted, though Jak would have to admit she felt amazing after all that rest, probably thanks to Li's plants as well.

"I see Li has been busy," she said, glancing at the walls.

"Yes," said Naman, following her gaze. "She says the plants like it here, though it's dark. She's been working at it all night, going further into the sewers and even up to the surface. The whole city will be covered soon enough."

"I hope that's a good thing," said Jamilla, her face revealing her doubts.

"I'm sure it will be," said Jak. "She said this city needs healing, and I think this qualifies. Besides, some of the vines could be used as weapons against the demons, or as a warning system to let us know if someone or something comes too close."

Naman nodded, "I suppose that could be useful, assuming you trust the woman."

"I trust her with my life," Jak replied.

"Well that's enough for me." Naman got to his feet. "Well then, Jak, why don't you put on some leather armor and we can set out."

"Armor? Do you think we'll run into trouble?"

"I always assume," he said. Well that made sense.

Jak quickly obeyed and retrieved the armor she had used the previous day. It stank slightly from her time in the river and sewers, but it would still do. She pulled it on and returned to find Naman and a few of the other rebels also in their armor, ready to move out.

They had a longer journey than Jak anticipated ahead of them. Or at least, it felt long. All of the sewer passages began to blend together after a while. Jak was glad that the others, at least, knew where they were going. Or she hoped they did. Naman seemed to know where he was headed.

Eventually, they came to an intersection of four separate tunnels, at which point Naman came to a halt. "This is where we're supposed to meet. I guess they're not here yet, so we'll wait."

Jak took some time to observe their location. What really amazed her was that even though they had traveled for at least half an hour, she could still see some of Li's vines creeping along the sewer walls. They weren't as thick here, but Jak figured it was only a matter of time. She could even see these vines moving. If she hadn't known it was Li, it would have been creepy.

They waited for several minutes. Then several minutes more. Soon Naman was beginning to pace, wandering up one passageway to stare down its nearest turn, then retreating to go down another.

"They should have been here by now," he said upon passing Jak. "I'm not sure what would keep them."

Jak felt a cold slowly begin to take hold of her heart. She needed to find that Gifter. The Royal Priest's drawing of the new brand was carefully folded in one pouch. She needed a Gifter to help her. But if

the leaders weren't coming, what could that mean?

"You don't suppose they were...killed," she asked, voicing the worst-case scenario.

"It's always possible," said Naman. "Though I would hope someone from each group would know to come here anyway. We would want to be informed of such developments. But many of us were out yesterday and saw no signs of trouble. I figured they were all still safe in their corners of the sewers."

Suddenly, footsteps echoed along the sewer tunnels, soft splashes in the water. Jak turned to see the source of the sound. But it was coming from behind them, the way they came. The rebels tightened their grips on their weapons, ready for anything.

A figure came round the corner, and Jak immediately recognized the person.

"Li?" she asked, putting out a hand to calm the rebels so they would lower their weapons. "What are you doing here?"

"There's a problem," Li said, slightly out of breath. "I just discovered."

"What is it?" said Naman, his brows furrowing.

"I think I must show you," said Li. She brushed past them and moved down the hallway to her right. Jak glanced at Naman, who shrugged slightly. Together they moved to follow Li.

They continued winding their way down the tunnel, though this time it was Li who led, and Naman didn't seem to know where they were going.

"I felt something when my vines reached this far," explained Li as they walked. "I found others, but I think there's something wrong."

Just as she said it, they rounded a corner and a horrifying sight reached their eyes.

Several corpses littered the area, with blood emanating from various wounds on their bodies. Some were disemboweled, others were missing limbs. Jak put a hand to her mouth as they walked closer.

"These were the other rebels," said Naman, a quiver in his voice. "They were the ones who were supposed to meet us here."

They continued forward, taking care not to step on the dead. There were dozens of them. As they moved on, they found the tunnel opening up into a larger sewer, with steps leading up the side to a flat outcropping, similar to what they had at their own base.

"I think this was one of their bases," said Li.

Naman nodded. "It was."

Li continued. "There are still others in other locations, but no one near this place. My vines have almost filled the sewers, at least somewhat, and there is no one close apart from us."

"They can't all be gone?" said Naman, his face aghast. "There were at least a hundred people in this cell."

Li touched a wall, focusing on some of the vines that crawled along the stone. Touching them, she closed her eyes to concentrate before opening them again and staring at Naman. She shook her head, and there was a look of sorrow on her face. "I'm sorry, I can't feel anyone. I was only able to sense these bodies because these were relatively fresh kills. They haven't started decomposing yet."

"That's true," said one of the accompanying rebels. "This happened no more than a day ago."

A day? That would place it no later than when Jak had temporarily left the city. Had this been retaliation for their attack? Perhaps Marek was already conducting a search on the sewers, seeking them. Seeking her.

"Wait," said Li, putting up one hand and looking like she was listening for something. After a pause, she said, "there are demons in the sewers."

That got their attention. "Where?" said Naman. "How many?"

"Just a few," said Li, her gaze distant. "They just entered not far from here. I've..." she made a sharp tilting gesture with her head, "I've taken care of some of them. There are more though, and another walking on two legs instead of four. That's all I can tell."

"That could be Cain or Marek," said Jak. "We have to evacuate."

"We've dealt with small groups of demons before," said one of the other rebels. "None have come close to our hideout."

Jak didn't look away from Naman. "If it's Cain or Marek, they will find us," she said, trying to emphasize the danger with her eyes.

Naman held her gaze for a while. Finally, he nodded. "Let's head back, we need to warn the others." Turning to Li, he added. "See what you can do to hold them off."

"I will," said Li, still with that faraway look on her face. "Many demons are dead already."

"I am very glad you're on our side," said Jak, before following Naman back the way they had come.

They retreated at a slow jog, even Li who eventually broke out of her minor trance to keep up with them. It took longer than was comfortable for Jak, but eventually they found their way back to the secret hideout.

"What's wrong?" said Jamilla as she caught sight of her husband and the rest of them.

"We need to get everyone ready to leave," said Naman, his voice grave. "The demons might know where we are, or if not, they'll find out soon enough."

Jamilla's face went pale, but she did not argue. Instead, she turned

and began giving orders to those who were nearby, retreating down the tunnel that led to the sleeping quarters.

Naman turned to Jak. "We have an escape route out the back, though it leads into the city. There are abandoned buildings we can hide in, but it's not going to be much safer than here."

Jak was beginning to feel a sense of panic rise into her chest. There was no chance that she would find the Gifter, if he was even still alive. Which meant she didn't have a chance of regaining her powers while she remained here. So that left one other option.

"Then maybe we don't stay in the city. We can take the river, or find another way out. Maybe climb over the wall like we did to get back in. We can escape and find the nearest town, maybe move towards Skyecliff."

Surely there had to be a Gifter somewhere. If one existed, she would find them. Of course, she did know of one place with several Gifters: Illadar. But she couldn't get back there without the Pillars of Eternity. And she couldn't even use those herself. She would need someone like Naem to get her there. And he was probably locked up tighter than the Royal Priest had been. There was no way they were getting into the palace with every one of their enemies looking for them, looking for her.

Li spoke up again, "There is still one in the sewers. He is coming closer. My plants are only slowing him down, instead of killing him like the other demons."

Jak took a deep breath. That could only be Cain or Marek. "You say he's coming this way?"

"Yes," Li grit her teeth as if in great effort. "He's moving fast."

"Get everyone out," Jak said to Naman. He did not waste time. He began barking orders as his wife had done.

"Drop the stores for now, just move out the back route. Waste no time."

People were obeying, filing out of the back rooms in a hurry. Jamilla had apparently alerted most of them already. One by one they flooded out a back door, with Naman staying behind, along with Jak and Li. Jamilla came out from the back rooms, nodding at Naman that everyone back there was out. Viona also found them, and stayed by Jak's side, despite the fact that Jak encouraged her to go.

"You might need invisibility again," said Viona. "I'm staying."

"It's a little late for that."

Jak spun, as did the rest of them to see Marek staring at them from across the halls. He held no weapon, but brands pulsed up and down his arms. He had kept those brands hidden from Jak before, when they had traveled up Mt. Knot together, but she could see them all now. He was the same as Kuldain, the first demon general Jak had

encountered, the one she had killed.

Marek looked at them with calculating eyes, his arms hanging comfortably at his sides. He was not at all afraid. None of them said a word.

“Running will do no good.” Marek continued to stare them

down. “I could send flames along every shaft of these sewers. With all the gas built up by this filth, it wouldn’t take much effort for this entire place to explode and crumble. This part of the city would implode on its own sewers.”

“Marek,” it was Jamilla. She took a step forward, one hand on her chest, and the other reaching out to the man who had been her son. “Marek, please. It’s your mother and father.”

“Jamilla, don’t,” said Jak in a hushed whisper. Marek would kill them. He was not the son they once knew.

But Marek did not move. He merely met the eyes of his mother. “Hello, Jamilla, Naman.” He didn’t address them as his parents.

“Son, we know you’ve been through a lot,” said Naman. “We’re sorry we couldn’t be there when you were at Foothold. But we’re here for you now. We can make this right.”

For a second, it almost seemed like Marek was listening to them. Then he scoffed. “You could have fought harder, insisted I come with you to Tradehall rather than give myself to the Watchers. You clearly didn’t love me enough.”

“We loved you enough to let you make your own decisions,” said Jamilla. “It broke our hearts when you said you wanted to leave, but you were of age, and needed someone who could guide your training as a Telekinetic. We couldn’t provide that for you.”

“There was a lot you couldn’t provide me, apparently.” Marek looked down at his arms, which were covered in brands. “And now I’m nothing of that boy you left.”

Jak tensed. What was Marek about to do? And why hadn’t he attacked them yet. Already he was doing more than she expected by even choosing to talk to his parents.

“We still love you, son,” said Jamilla, taking a step closer and reaching out her arms for an embrace. “We can be together again.”

To Jak’s surprise, Marek actually seemed to be considering the offer. His face was contorted, and Jak wasn’t sure she could read all

the many emotions that seemed to pile on his face at once.

Jamilla drew closer, her arms still outstretched, as Marek stood rooted to the spot. But when she was close enough to touch he finally took a step back and slapped away one of her arms. “Get away from me.”

“It’s okay,” she said in a soft tone. “We’re here. You never have to leave us again.”

“I said, get away!” Marek yelled. His Telekinetic brand lit up and an invisible force hurled Jamilla backward. She hit the nearest wall, padded slightly by Li’s vines, before sliding down to its base. Jak glanced at her just long enough to know she was okay before staring back at Marek.

She tensed. If he wanted to kill them, there was nothing she could do. Viona was inching closer to Jak, but even with the elf’s magic, Marek was right that he could fill all these tunnels with fire. They wouldn’t be able to get out in time.

But Marek didn’t attack. Instead he screamed, a frustrated scream that echoed down the passages. “Get out!” he yelled, pointing behind them. He was letting them go? How was that possible? “My master knows you are down here, somewhere. He will be coming for you soon. Get out of the city if you can.”

Jak stood, dumbfounded as Naman and Jamilla scrambled to do as Marek said. They retreated out the back, towards the secret exit. Viona and Li followed, but Jak just stood there. Had she misunderstood Marek this whole time?

“You go too,” said Marek, his eyes flashing.

“You’re not going to take me to your master?”

“Not this time. You’ve proven resourceful. I want to see how it ends. Now go.”

Jak did not argue twice. She retreated down the hallway until she caught up with Naman and the others. She followed them up until they reached open air. The passageway led inside of a stone structure. The wooden parts of the building had already been burned away. Some of those embers were what covered up the entrance to the sewer that they now emerged from. Jak looked around at the ruined building. Perhaps it had been some kind of maintenance station for the building.

“Are we close to the city wall?” she asked as everyone assembled.

“Not far,” said Naman. “But we can’t move in daylight. We’ll have to stay here until it’s dark, then we can move.” “I’ll do what I can to protect this place,” said Li, some of her vines wrapping around her arms.

“Be careful,” said Jak. “If this building is the only one surrounded by your plants, it will signal to Cain exactly where we are.”

Li surprised Jak by cracking a soft smile. “I already have seeds planted all over the city. We’re going to turn it into the biggest garden you’ve ever seen.”

Jak cracked a smile. “I like the sound of that.”

“Cain isn’t likely to take kindly to it, so that alone makes it worth it.”

“Then I’ll leave you to it.”

Li nodded and wandered off to an opening in the roof that had previously collapsed in a fire. She extended a hand and a single vine wrapped around the remaining timbers, like a snake. Li knelt and leaned in, as if communicating with the thing.

It was still a little off-putting to see Li converse with nature, but Jak wasn’t complaining. Li was the best advantage they had at the moment, almost single handedly taking care of stray demons in the city. Only those who stayed within the confines of the palace would likely have a chance at survival. Though Marek had mentioned more demons were on the way. Jak would have to ask Li if she could keep up her work against a whole army of them. She had a feeling that one member of her race would not be enough.

That reminded Jak, what should they call Li? As of right now, she appeared to be the only member of her species of Fae, but maybe there had been more on Illadar and they hadn’t known it yet. And they might still be sick as well, which made it all the more important to return to Illadar as soon as they could, carrying at least one plant with them.

But they couldn’t do that without Jak’s powers and the Pillars of Eternity. And no matter how much she wanted to stay in Tradehall, to rescue Naem and extract the Pillars of Eternity, she didn’t have a chance without that Gifter. She needed her brands, every single one of them.

THEY WAITED until nightfall to leave the city. Li provided them with heavy, thick vines draped across the nearest city wall. A few of Naman’s men had gone back into the sewers to extract some of their supplies. Marek had left the place, and though demons were trying to get in, Li informed them that she was taking care of most of that, and that the sewers were almost completely empty. Almost.

“We’re ready to go,” Naman told Jak after some of the last of the rebels had extracted themselves from the sewers.

Li joined them, “I’ve covered almost the entire city with life. The demons will have no chance at getting through without me knowing it. And...”

In that moment, several things happened at once. Li broke off with a soft cry, clutching at her chest. A warm light illuminated the sky,

bright enough to light up the clouds above. It was coming from just off the center of the city, not far from where they now stood.

But worst of all, a familiar feeling of dread had lodged itself in Jak's stomach. This was not an ordinary feeling, but one that she felt particularly strongly when Cain was near and angry.

"He's coming," she said, softly.

In answer, a voice bellowed across the city with supernatural volume. "I KNOW YOU'RE HERE, JAK," it said. "YOUR PRECIOUS MAREK HAS TOLD ME EVERYTHING."

Another flash of light accompanied another wince from Li. "He's killing my vines," she said through gritted teeth. "Cutting through them like butter. I can't grow them fast enough."

"I ALSO KNOW THERE ARE OTHERS," said Cain. "IF YOU COME OUT, I WILL LET THEM LIVE. OTHERWISE I WILL BURN THIS ENTIRE CITY TO THE GROUND, WITH YOU AND EVERYONE ELSE!"

Jak raced to think of what to do next. They couldn't scale the walls. Not now that Cain was out and looking for them. If they exposed themselves, he would be on them in an instant. Relics, why hadn't they just left when they had the chance. Sure it was risky in daylight, but that might have been why Cain waited until now to reveal himself. He knew that they would likely leave at night.

Viona stood by Jak's side. "You cannot give yourself up. You know he won't honor his word."

"I know," said Jak, still trying to think. She turned to Naman. "Perhaps it would actually be safer in the sewers."

Naman shook his head. "You heard my son, just a little fire and the entire place could erupt. Even with Li's vine helping to clean the air, there is still too much gas down there."

"So stay just below the entrance here, just enough that you could get out in time, but you could also avoid any of Cain's blasts from above."

"It might work for now, but we can't stay that way forever."

"I know, I know," Jak went back to thinking. How could they possibly avoid Cain and all his demons enough to get everyone out of the city. At the moment, it seemed all but impossible. There was Viona's magic, but that couldn't work on more than one or two people at a time...

A crazy, outlandish idea popped into her head. She leaned back her head, and opened her eyes wide.

"What is it?" said Viona, noting Jak's expression.

Jak ignored the question and climbed a mound of rubble to try and get a peek at Cain. Did he have the Pillars of Eternity with him?

At that moment, another flash erupted nearby, closer this time. Li winced but bent down to keep her arms to the ground, encouraging

the plants that spread out from where she stood. But Jak saw exactly what she wanted to see, Cain hovering in the air, forming the fireballs that were raining down around them. There were no staffs in his hands, or strapped to his back.

"Jak, tell me. What are you thinking?" Viona repeated.

"You're not going to like it," said Jak.

"What can be worse than this?"

That was a fair point. Jak turned first to Naman. "Let's get everyone just below the surface. Stay there as long as you can."

Naman nodded and began waving everyone back through the small hatch that led down to the sewers.

Jak turned next to Viona. "Cain is distracted now...properly distracted."

Understanding lit Viona's eyes immediately. "That is a fool's mission."

"He doesn't have the Pillars of Eternity on him. That means they're probably tucked away in the palace. And Naem will be there too. He could use the Pillars of Eternity to get us out of here."

"What if it's a trap, and Cain is luring you to the palace."

"Then I'm caught. The same thing will happen eventually if we stay. That or we'll all die."

Viona looked like she was going to protest. She opened her mouth and closed it again. But as crazy as the plan sounded, it was the only option available to them. Jak knew it, and by the look in her face, Viona knew it too.

In the end, the Shadow Elf shook her head in an expression of exasperation. "You are by far the craziest, most reckless person I have ever met."

"Let's hope it works," said Jak, shrugging off the remark, though she wasn't sure anyone had called her reckless before, though they easily could have.

Viona didn't waste any time. Just as another fireball hit a nearby building, she grabbed Jak's hand, and the magic passed between them, washing the pair of them in a cloak of invisibility.

Then they ran.

T

hey passed through an opening in the building, but instead of turning left to the nearest wall, they turned right towards the center of the city, and the wooden towers of the city palace. It was the only building Cain didn't seem to be targeting with his fireballs.

The roads and buildings were covered in Li's vines, though not so much that they couldn't make their way through the streets without tripping.

Jak spared a glance upward as she ran for Cain, who still hovered above them. He had begun repeating the words he had first spoken when he arrived. Which was good. It meant he wasn't truly ready to destroy the city yet. These fireballs were just to emphasize his point. He could probably do a lot more damage if he wanted to.

Jak and Viona continued to run, not bothering to cover up their footsteps. With the noise of the fireballs and burning buildings, there was no way Cain would be able to hear them. And there were no more living demons that Jak could see, though they passed a few corpses with Li's needles sticking out of their flesh.

At the speed at which they were running, it actually didn't take long to reach the palace. They headed straight for the central door, the one that led into the large hall that gave the city its name. It was the first place Jak had seen Cain with the Pillars of Eternity, and the first place she cared to look.

They opened the door, and stopped immediately upon entering. Jak had expected to find demons there, live demons guarding the way to the Pillars. But there was nothing. That was odd. Cain wasn't so stupid as to leave his precious Relics undefended.

But she didn't have time to think. "Let's go," she whispered to Viona, and together they moved to the opposite end of the hall. Here, there was a door that Cain had retreated through shortly after Jak, Li, and Viona had arrived here. That seemed as good of a place to start as any.

Jak creaked open the door with her spare hand, slowly so as not to make much noise. If there weren't any demons here, they should

probably expect them somewhere. But once again, there didn't appear to be anyone around.

"I don't like this," said Viona. Jak agreed. It felt too much like the trap Viona had warned of. But if it was a trap, there wasn't much either of them could do about it. They were too deep into it now.

Jak slipped through the door, and felt Viona do the same behind her.

Inside was a room lit by a few candles. It wasn't large like the hall, but it wasn't small either. It looked a lot like the comfortable and spacious rooms that a nobleman might use. There was a bed in the corner, and a few extra doors that likely led to a closet or lavatory.

But Jak only barely registered the room. The first thing she saw set every emotion flaring.

Naem was tied to a central post that held up part of the room. His arms hung downward and small tubes were embedded in each one. Jak's eyes followed the tubes to see that they carried blood to two different dishes along one side of the wall. Her eyes widened as she saw all the different instruments, containers, and other equipment she could not identify, almost all of which held some portion of Naem's blood.

Cain was experimenting with Naem.

The Watcher was unconscious, stripped to the waist, and his entire body cold and pale. After a brief pause to take it all in, Jak rushed forward to check on Naem, to make sure he was still alive. She almost cried out for joy when she saw he was still breathing, though it was shallow.

"We've got to get him out of here," she said, fingering the cords that strapped Naem to the wooden post.

Viona nodded and immediately extracted her dagger. The sharp obsidian cut through the cords like they were nothing, and Naem fell into Jak's arms.

He wasn't nearly as heavy as Jak thought he would be, or as he should be. Cain had obviously drained him of a lot of blood, and some of his muscles had also atrophied. He was barely a shell of what he once was. Even without her Strength brand, she was able to move him with little effort. But they had to get those tubes out of his arms.

She grabbed the nearest one and pulled. It came out without too much effort, but blood gushed from where it had once been. Jak yelped and pushed down on the wound. The bleeding slowed.

"You won't have to worry about that for long." Jak's head turned and every muscle in her body froze to see Marek standing casually against the wall. He must have come in the room after them. Stupid, they should have closed the door behind them.

Viona had spun as well, but she did not make any aggressive

moves, though she held her dagger at the ready. Perhaps she understood that they could not actually do anything to hurt Marek even if they tried.

“The bleeding,” Marek clarified. “He’s got a Healing brand. That’ll close up in no time. It’s the reason we required the tubes in the first place, otherwise his wounds would simply close every time we tried to extract blood. And the Toughness brand made even that job more of a nuisance. But give him a moment and you’ll be able to carry him.”

“Why are you saying this?” said Jak. “I thought you were with him.”

Marek sneered slightly and left his place leaning against the wall to wander closer. Viona tightened her grip on her dagger. “Cain has given me much, it’s true. I may even be somewhat compelled to obey him. But I am also not some mindless demon. I am something far greater. And Cain, for all his power, is a fool. He does not deserve the weapons he seeks. You, on the other hand...” He took a step closer to Jak.

“Stop right there,” said Jak. Relics, she wished she had a weapon right about now. Not that it would do any good against Marek.

Marek raised his hands in a gesture of peace. “I will not harm you, Jak. I never wanted to kill you. That’s why I gave you the Void brand and sent you through the portal instead of following my master’s order to kill you after giving you the Void brand.”

“The Void brand nearly did kill me,” said Jak, remembering the harsh conditions they had found on Illadar.

“You are more resilient than that,” said Marek. “And in time, I see you becoming far greater than Cain could ever be. That’s why he wanted you at his side when you first met. He recognized your potential then, though now he only fears it.”

He fears you. The dying words of her father came back to her. Could that still be the case, even now that she had lost her powers? Could Cain really see her as a threat?

“Cain thinks power is the secret to greatness,” Marek continued. “But you and I know that power has equal potential to blind. Ingenuity, innovation, these are the marks of a true leader, one who can wield true power. One who can lead others. For all his brands and long-lifespan, the only ones who follow Cain are those he has bent to his will.”

“So you’re just going to let us go?” Jak said, cautiously. This could still be a trap. But if it was, why hadn’t Marek sprung it already? He could overtake the both of them at a moment’s notice.

In answer, Marek gestured towards a large cabinet attached to the side of the room, near where Cain’s strange collection of blood experiments lay. “You’ll want to look in there first.”

Jak glanced at the cabinet, then back at Marek. Could it be?

In one fluid motion, she strode over to the cabinet and flung its doors open. Inside stood both Pillars of Eternity. The two higher Relics gleamed in the firelight, the first a polished black with white runes inscribed up and down its length. That was the Pillar of Time. The other appeared the opposite, with a white surface and covered in black runes. It was the Pillar of Space, one that allowed the user to travel from one place to another instantly.

Jak reached for the pair of them, her skin tingling as they touched their cool surfaces. She cradled them both in her hands. They had come so far, and now they were here. She had found what she needed.

Unconsciously, she mentally reached out to both Pillars, trying to activate their power. But nothing came. The Void brand still prevented her from using them. She couldn't stop a small growl of frustration to escape her lips. But it was okay. Naem could probably use them, which meant they had to get him out, and probably to a Healer. Naem's own Healing brand would help, but would also work slowly. They needed a faster solution.

She looked back at Marek. "Come with us," she said. "Cain will kill you when he learns what happened."

"He will be angry, certainly, perhaps enough to take out his anger on me. But he will not know that I let you go. I'm supposed to be out beyond the city limits, patrolling to find you and the other rebels. He will not know that I came here for you."

"But you could do much more good if you came with me."

He shook his head. "I told you, there are some...compulsions that forbid me from fighting against him directly. It's taking all my willpower not to stop you, in fact. But the fact that I am, technically not fighting against him, but simply allowing you to leave with your prize, that is the only way I can undermine him. But I will not be completely free until you kill him."

The pronouncement brought an edge of soberness to the conversation. Kill Cain. Yes, that did seem to be where all of this was headed. Which only emphasized her need to regain the use of her brands.

"Then we'd better leave," said Viona, glancing at Jak. She hadn't lowered her dagger, but at least she seemed to understand that Marek would have stopped them by now if he had planned to.

"Go back the way you came," said Marek. "I must return to the outside of the city. Have your friend help you escape if he can manage it." He waved a hand at Naem. "You are lucky he has proven almost as resilient as you."

Jak did not argue. She hefted Naem's unconscious body but Viona quickly stepped forward to help. Together, they managed to lift Naem

onto Viona's shoulders. He was heavy, but his ordeal with Cain had made him light enough that Viona could carry him without too much difficulty. Jak grabbed the two Pillars of Eternity and joined Viona. The Shadow Elf wouldn't be able to hold her hand to share her magic as before. But maybe Jak could grab hold of Viona's arm or something.

"One last thing, Jak," said Marek as they prepared to leave. Jak turned to face her...friend. Yes, there was still something of her friend left in the man. "Fullness," he said, simply.

Jak frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"Fullness is what the Gifter must imagine when branding the Anti-Void brand, that is what I came here for. The Royal Priest told you of the brand, did he not? That's why you wanted him?"

Jak felt a wave of excitement rush over her. "Yes, he told me about it. Is that it? The Gifter just imagines fullness?"

Marek nodded, "It's a relatively simple brand, though not one that is remembered in our current culture, since it isn't of much use to anyone but an Oren."

A thought suddenly occurred to Jak. "Marek, you could do it! You could embed the Anti-Void brand on, I don't know, a piece of clothing or something. Then I could wear it and get my brands back!" The thought triggered an even greater wave of excitement within her.

But the look on Marek's face brought her hopes crashing down. "I'm sorry Jak, but I don't actually have a Gifter brand. Cain doesn't want me creating new demons. Not yet, I guess."

"But," Jak's eyebrows narrowed, "but you gave me the Void brand."

Marek nodded, "Believe it or not that was actually something else. Cain was able to use me as a sort of vessel in that moment, using another brand we don't know about. He gave you the Void brand, not me. I was just his hands in that moment."

"But you said he wanted to kill me, not give me the Void brand."

"He wanted me to kill you *after* receiving the Void brand. It was only used to make you vulnerable. You were tired and exhausted from what you had done, and removing your powers only made it worse."

"But then you sent me through the portal," said Jak, understanding at last.

He nodded, "and I nearly paid a price for it. I was lucky that Cain was far more obsessed with the Pillars of Eternity that he all but forgot about what I had done."

"And now I'm taking them away. Even if he doesn't know you let me take them, he's going to blame you. He'll need someone to blame, and there's no one else apart from you and himself."

"I know. But I do not think he will kill me." Marek sighed. "I'm the

only true servant he has left, at least in this part of the world. In his confused mind, I think I'm the closest thing he has to a friend."

"Good luck," said Jak, before hoisting the two Pillars under one arm and putting her free hand on Viona's forearm. Then in a wash of magic, the three of them, including Naem, disappeared from view.

"Goodbye, Jak," said Marek, as they opened the door to the large hall, and made their way to the exit.

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Jak could not believe what had just happened. Marek, the man she had thought lost, was perhaps not so far gone as she believed. There was no way he would have just let them take the Pillars of Eternity and Naem if he was fully committed to Cain. There was still something of darkness in Marek, Jak could tell, but there was hope for him. She vowed right then that she would come back for him if she could. But before that could happen, she had to deal with Cain.

When they exited the palace, a sea of flames greeted them. The entire city was burning, even parts of the walls. The only part of the city that wasn't alight with fire was the palace itself, though it almost certainly would catch fire eventually, if only from flames spreading from other buildings.

"We have to go to the sewers," said Jak. It was risky, given all the flames that could spark the gases in the sewers. But the entrances to the sewers were on a lower level than most of the buildings. Hopefully the flames would not reach down there yet. And they needed to get to the others. Naem needed a Healer.

They raced as fast as they could, given the fact that Viona was carrying Naem. But the nearest entrance to the sewers was not too far away. They couldn't go back to the small building where the backdoor had been. It was likely a burning sack of embers by this point. But that didn't mean they couldn't go through the main entrance, the first one they had ever discovered.

But when they arrived at the canal where the sewer tunnels emptied themselves, they were greeted by an unexpected sight. The vines had grown into something enormous, joining together to form one giant tendril. It protruded out of the tunnel like a great arm, and rose high into the sky. Relics, what were the limits of what Li was capable of?

"Broken brands," said Viona in awe.

Jak's gaze followed the giant arm of vines to see where it led, and saw that it was not the only one. Several other such arms rose into the sky throughout the city, many of them burning, but where one fell,

another took its place. They were writhing above the burning city, as if in pain. But they were also converging around a distant form, flying in the sky.

It was Cain.

The demon king spewed jets of fire at each of the tendrils, even as some managed to grab him and hold him in place, he would burn the very vines that held him in a giant burst of energy. Li was single handedly holding Cain off.

But Jak knew it wouldn't last. Cain was powerful, and plant life wouldn't last long against his flames, even when directed by such a Fae as Li. But for now, Li was holding him off, distracting him. Which was exactly what Jak needed right now.

"Let's hurry," she said, urging Viona onward. "Where?" said Viona. "Those vines are coming out of every tunnel, we can't get through them."

"If Li knows it's us, she might let us through."

They climbed down the steps to the canal, hoping against hope that the writhing mass of vines did not somehow knock them into the water or worse. When they arrived at the right tunnel, Jak put one hand out hesitantly to touch the first of the vines to protrude out of the tunnel.

"Li," she said aloud. "It's us, we need to get through."

For a moment, nothing happened. The vines continued to pulsate and writhe as the giant tendril above them swatted at Cain.

But then something began to happen. The vines began to move open, as if making room for them. While the tendril was still above their heads, participating in the fight against Cain, now there was a cavity at the base, just large enough for the two of them to climb through.

Jak thanked the ancestors, and thanked Li as well, as they climbed inside. Behind them, the vines closed up, leaving them alone in the dark, like being inside a hollow tree made up of multiple, moving vines.

It was completely black, so Jak let Viona lead the way, since she could still see in the dark. They followed the path they had first used to find the rebels, which took them one way, then another. All the while, Li's vines coated the walls.

A few minutes later, they arrived in the more open space that marked the entrance to the rebels' hideout, though the area was hardly open anymore.

"There are vines everywhere," said Viona, describing what she was seeing. "All I can see is a small opening leading up the stairs."

"Li knows we're here," said Jak, "and she's clearing a path."

They went up the stairs, and soon found themselves in the room

where they had first met the rebels. To Jak's immediate relief, she spotted Naman and Jamilla among others. They were still alive.

"You're here!" exclaimed Naman as he caught sight of them. "Li said you were coming."

"What happened?" asked Jamilla.

Viona put Naem down on the floor, cushioned by vines. Viona called for a healer as Jak brandished the Pillars of Eternity.

"We got them," she said. "And we got Naem."

Raine came forward hurriedly, the only Healer in the company.

Luckily, Amelia's mother was already there with the others, and she came immediately.

"He already has a Healing brand," explained Jak as Raine bent down next to Naem. "But he's lost a lot of blood, and he hasn't regained consciousness since we took him."

"Give me a moment," said Raine, stretching her arms and torso over Naem's body.

Jak glanced back at Naman. "Where is Li? Do you know what she's doing out there?"

"We know she's doing something to keep Cain busy," said Naman. "She's over there." He pointed to a corner, where a mass of vines lay.

Jak drew closer to see Li embedded in almost a cocoon of her own vines. The Royal Priest sat next to her, as if watching or waiting to help Li if needed. That was odd behavior.

Li's vines wrapped around her arms, legs, chest, and even parts of her face. The woman's eyes were rolled back in her head, and she looked to be in some sort of trance.

"He is coming," she said as Jak neared. She said it almost like she wasn't truly aware of Jak's presence. "He is coming, he is following the path."

"Li," Jak said. "Li, it's me. Who's coming, Cain?"

"He is coming," Li repeated. "He is coming to find the source."

Her face was awash of pain and concentration. Jak did not blame her. All that fire tearing down her plant life, and all the effort it must take to continue producing such life must be exhausting and painful.

"Cain is coming?" Jak tried to clarify.

"Cain is coming," said Li. "He is coming for me."

Jak turned to face Naman. "We have to move fast. If Cain is coming for Li that means he's likely following the vines to their source. I'm sure she'll do her best to fight him off, but he will be here soon."

"What do we do?" said Naman.

“What, where am I?” moaned Naem from his place on the ground. Jak immediately forgot what she was going to say to Naman and rushed to his side.

“Naem,” she said. “It’s me, you’re safe.” Well safer than he had been for sure. But with Cain making his way towards them, they wouldn’t be safe for long.

“J-Jak?” said Naem. “Is this a dream?”

“It’s not a dream, Naem. We got you out of the palace where Cain was keeping you.”

“He told me you were dead, and all the Fae were gone.”

“It’s not true, Naem. We’re all still here. But I need you to help me with something.”

“What is it?”

Li screamed from her corner. “He is coming!” she yelled.

Jak turned her attention back to Naem. “Naem, listen to me. You have to use the Pillars of Eternity. We have to get out of here.”

Naem shook his head. “No. No, no. It’s a trick. I can’t use them. If I use them you’ll destroy everything.”

He still thought he was in Cain’s clutches. She grabbed his face and pulled him close. “Listen, Naem. I am not Cain. I will not hurt you. Remember when you said you would always care for me? Remember that? Remember when I welcomed you back? When you saved my life?”

Naem blinked at her. “Jak?” he said, as if truly remembering for the first time.

“He’s getting stronger,” said Raine. She looked tired, but determined. Healing another could put a lot of strain on the Healer, but hopefully it wouldn’t be so bad this time because Naem had his own Healing brand.

Indeed, color was beginning to come back to Naem’s cheeks. “Jak?” he repeated.

“Yes,” said Jak. “It’s really me. This isn’t a trick.”

A brief flash of fiery light came down the tunnel accompanied by another scream from Li, “HE IS COMING!”

Jak waved at Naman. “Gather everyone together. We have to leave.”

“To where?” said Naman, but Jak wasn’t paying attention anymore. Instead she had her hands wrapped tightly around Naem’s face.

“Naem, they gave me a Void brand. I can’t use the Pillars of Eternity. But you can. Talk to them, Naem. Tell them to take us to Illadar.”

She took both of the Pillars and placed them in each of Naem’s hands. Slowly, his fingers wrapped themselves around the handles.

There was a pause for a moment, too long for Jak's comfort. More cries from Li indicated Cain was drawing closer, destroying her plants as he went. And the light of those fires was growing brighter.

"I can hear them," said Naem. His brow was furrowed, and he still looked disoriented, but his voice was stronger. The combined power of both his Healing brand and that of the Healer were doing their job. "They say..." he looked up at Jak, his eyes becoming clearer. "They say it's really you."

"We need to get to Illadar, Naem. Can you communicate that with them? It's a planet many millions of miles away. But they can get us there instantly."

"Y-yes, I think..."

A crash sounded behind Jak, and she spun to see countless vines in flames. Cain was practically on top of them. He would be there within seconds. "Now, Naem!"

In a single movement, Naem was on his feet, his eyes wide and his mouth open in amazement. "I can feel it!"

A giant, purple disc of pulsating energy erupted in front of him. It was large enough that at least three people could walk through it standing side by side.

Jak's face lit up with a hopeful smile. "Everyone go through the portal!" She screamed.

Naman did not hesitate, plunging himself through the disk of energy. Jamilla followed soon after, as did many others, including the Royal Priest, who only paused to take in the glowing disk of energy before stepping through with surprising confidence. As they went, the rest of the company got over their hesitation and ran through the portal. There were only a few dozen of them.

"We have to get Li out?" yelled Viona.

Jak cursed and twisted to see the eastern woman swaying in her corner, still covered in vines.

"Hand me your dagger," Jak reached out and Viona tossed the weapon to her. Jak immediately dove to reach Li. She cut at the vines that held Li in place, causing the woman to cry out and collapse, though that might also have been from the flames that suddenly wrapped themselves around the enclosure. Cain was here.

With a final burst of effort, Jak grabbed Li and lunged toward the portal. "Grab Naem!" she yelled at Viona. Then she plunged head-first through the glowing disk. The last thing she saw was Cain's silhouette against a fiery hole of burning vines.

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he fell on the other side of the portal, with Li by her side. Viona followed a split second later, holding Naem by one arm. The portal collapsed immediately upon their arrival. Jak let her head rest on the soft dirt. They were safe.

But hang on, the last time she had been on Illadar, the ground had not felt this soft. And come to think of it, the air wasn't in the least bit cold. She rose to a sitting position to stare around them.

If this was Illadar, it was nothing like she remembered it. The air was warm, and tall trees, flowers, and plant life of every kind grew around them. Through the gaps in the trees she could make out mountains, though none of them looked like anything she recognized.

"Naem, where did you take us?"

Naem slowly stumbled to his feet, using the two Pillars as support. "This isn't Illadar? I thought I communicated that clearly with the Pillars."

Just at that moment, Jak caught the slightest movement along one of the plants, like a small form running through the underbrush, short enough that all she could make out was its...red hair.

"Hey," she called out. "It's us. Don't run away." She ran off to try and chase the small figure. If it was who she thought it was...

Girwirt stepped out from behind some giant fern leaves, his diminutive form accented by his flaming red hair. He was a gnome, a Fae over the element of fire.

"It...it really is you. We all figured you died the moment you left, as crazy as your plan was."

Jak smiled. For all his words, Girwirt's eyes betrayed him. He was happy to see them.

"Girwirt, what happened here?" Jak looked all around them. This really must be Illadar if Girwirt was here. "When I left, this was a frozen waste land."

"Well we managed to learn to moderate the weather." said Girwirt with a hint of pride in his voice. "Between us and those Ice Fae, we made it pretty liveable. Then we started planting some seeds that the

Triad had brought, and suddenly there's a whole new type of Fae."

"What do you mean?" said Li. She was standing now, and standing tall. In fact, she looked stronger than ever, even after that fight against Cain. Jak had to assume it was because they were in a place so vibrant with life.

"They are...well," Girwirt looked Li up and down. "Well they're like you, giant. A weird green color. We thought they were sick but the moment we started to try and grow the food, they got all weird and wouldn't leave the gardens. It was like they were worshiping it or something, very strange. But soon enough the seeds grew at unnatural paces, and even more came from that." He gestured around him. "If you ask me, it's kind of gone out of control."

"It's wonderful," said Li, closing her eyes as if to bask in all of it.

"You know, that's exactly what they say," said Girwirt. "Weird giants."

"Where are the others, Girwirt," said Jak. She had to get back to the main camp. For multiple reasons.

"They're not far. In fact, you go past some of those trees and you'd practically be stomping on them. You know that old cave? It's over there," he pointed straight ahead of them.

Jak didn't stop to see if the others were coming. She didn't even stop to answer Girwirt when he asked, "Now who are all these people?" She only continued straight ahead.

Soon, the camp came into view. It wasn't much of a camp anymore, but a small town. Crude but sturdy buildings had been built out of the rock, and they were far more spread out than Jak remembered. Before they had all huddled together to best conserve warmth, so the buildings and tents had all been close.

Many saw her, and rose to their feet as they did so. The looks on their faces made Jak want to smile even further. They knew who she was, and they knew that seeing her again meant that their mission was at least partially a success. And it was, though it was not over. She would have to go back to Earth as soon as possible, to rescue everyone else who still lived in Tradehall.

But for now, she had several purposes, and she didn't know which one to start with. Thankfully she didn't have to make that choice.

A familiar figure stepped out from the back of a stone hut, his silhouette was familiar to Jak, the way he walked, and the way he paused to look at them. As she drew closer, the man began to run toward her. She ran as well. And soon they were clutching at each other, their arms wrapping as tight as they possibly could around the other.

"You're back," said Seph through very real tears. "I thought I might never see you again."

Tears were streaming down Jak's cheeks as well. "Whatever happened to having faith in me."

"You know that doesn't stop a man from worrying."

They broke the embrace and Jak nearly leapt forward to kiss her husband. They kissed for a long time, and Jak didn't care who was watching. Those of her company had caught up to her by now, but she didn't pause to look back. Not for a long while.

When they finally broke the kiss, she glanced back at the others. Girwirt was standing with his arms folded, a look of annoyance on his small face. Viona was smiling slightly, as was Li. The others, on the other hand, looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Seph," she said, trying to fill the silence. "This is Naman and Jamilla. They were leading the rebels in Tradehall where Cain was. And you already know Naem." The former Watcher was trying very hard not to meet Jak's eye.

"Of course," Seph stepped forward to try and shake all of their hands. "It's good to have more of you here. And...what is this?" He had caught sight of the Pillars of Eternity in Naem's hands. He looked back at Jak. "You got them?" he said, incredulously.

"You really need to work on that faith thing."

"But that must mean...do you have your brands back?"

"No, Naem brought us here, not me. But I might have something. I need a Gifter, anyone left in the camp."

Seph nodded. "We have several. They've been busy giving all of the Triad's people at least one brand."

"I need to see one of them, immediately."

"And I think we need a council meeting," said a voice behind Jak. She turned to see Skellig striding up to meet them. She smiled and clasped arms with the former Watcher. "It's good to see you safe."

"And it's good to be back, but unfortunately I cannot stay long."

"Why is that?"

"Well, perhaps it's best if I do talk to the whole council."



WORD TRAVELED FAST that Jak was back, and that she had brought the Pillars of Eternity with her. So it didn't take long for all of the council members to assemble themselves inside the cave, which had become a sort of headquarters for the group, now that it was no longer necessary for shelter or warmth.

Jak surveyed each member of the council as they arrived. Viona took back her place as the leader of the Shadow Elves. Beside her was Yewin, representing the Bright Elves. Cerai the Water Fae splashed

around in a small pool they must have formed in the cave since Jak had left. Though Jak didn't spot her other Water Fae friend, Amelia. She would have to find her soon to tell her that her mother, Raine, had come through the portal with her.

Girwirt, Noralim, Perchel, and Bretton represented the gnomes, dwarves, Sky Fae, and Ice Fae respectively, and they were even joined by Rael the troll, who gave Jak a bone-splintering pat on the back in greeting.

Lastly came the human representatives. Skellig, Seph, and Mosaial, the only member of the Triad who had not become Fae since arriving on Illadar. Li was another member of that group, though she was now Fae. Naem also joined them, holding the Pillars of Eternity in each hand. He was looking much better.

"It's good to see you again, Jak," said Yewin, and he seemed to speak for every member of the council. Every one of them were smiling and nodding their heads.

"You've done a tremendous job without me," said Jak. "Girwirt told me you had a new race of Fae step up and create all of this plant life."

"Yes, we've started calling them Nature Fae for now," said Skellig. "And it looks like Li is one of them. So we can assume you know what they're capable of?"

Jak nodded, glancing at Li as she did so. "They're among the most powerful Fae I've ever seen."

"I wanted to call them Wood Elves," mumbled Girwirt, "But no one listens to me. 'Wood' is too specific they say."

"They have certainly made an impact here," said Seph. "We've had plenty of food to feed all seven thousand of us."

"That really is great news," admitted Jak. "I thought you were going to eat nothing but mushrooms while I was gone."

"Now what's wrong with that?" protested Girwirt.

"But I have a lot of news," Jak got back to business. "And not a lot of time."

She proceeded to tell them everything that had happened so far since arriving back on Earth. She told them about Tradehall, about the rebels there, and how Cain was burning the city to the ground as they spoke.

"There are still many in the sewers and hidden across the city," Li confirmed.

"Which is why I have to get back as soon as possible. I have to bring everyone back that still exists in the city, and hold off Cain until they're safely away."

"There are other prisoners as well," added Naem. Jak turned to look at him. He hadn't mentioned that before, though he hadn't

exactly had the time. “When Cain was torturing me, he would sometimes bring in one of my companions, people who had fought with me in Skyecliff, or recruits that I had convinced to join our cause. He would...kill them in front of me when I refused to help him. But there are still many more in his dungeons.”

“But how do you propose to bring them back,” said Skellig, and many of the others nodded at her statement. “After all, you barely had the power to hold Cain back even when you had all your brands.”

“That’s the other thing I needed to talk to you about. There is another brand that could negate the effects of the Void brand. I need a Gifter to use it on a strap of leather or something I can tie to my wrist. That might give me the use of my brands again.”

“How did you come by this information?” said Yewin, looking impressed.

“The Royal Priest told me. He has a Void brand and once tried to use it on Cain, but it wouldn’t work because of this new brand.”

“And you trust the Royal Priest?”

Jak hesitated. How would they react if she told them about what Marek had done for them. She decided not to bring it up for now. “Yes, I trust him. All I need is a Gifter.”

“Then we had better find one immediately,” said Skellig. “I’ll give the order.”

She stepped out of the circle and jogged towards the cave entrance.

“I suppose the rest of us should see to the needs of the newcomers,” said Mosaial.

Jak nodded, “There aren’t many, but Amelia’s mother is among them.” She glanced at Cerai’s face, which lit up.

“She will be so happy to hear that.” said Cerai.

“Where is she, anyway?” Jak asked.

“When the snow melted, some of it pooled into nearby lakes. Most of the other Water Fae were carried to one of the largest ones. I will be joining them soon.”

“I’m sure that’s liberating,” Jak commented.

“It is,” said Cerai. “And we hope to find an ocean soon. There’s nothing more freeing than being a Water Fae in the ocean.”

Jak turned back to Yewin, glancing at Li as well. “And where are the other...Nature Fae?” she asked.

“They’re usually out among the small forest you arrived in. I’m surprised you didn’t see them already.”

“I did,” said Li. “Or at least I sensed them through the foliage.”

“You should go to them, Li,” said Jak with a warm smile.

Li smiled back. “I will, but do not leave this planet without finding me first. I wish to return with you.”

Jak hesitated, but nodded. "If that is your wish." The woman could still be useful to help find other human survivors with her network of vines. Assuming any of them were still living when they got back.

Li bowed slightly before proceeding out of the cave. With a slight nod at the others, Jak decided to go as well, at the very least to enjoy the fresh air outside. The council broke and followed her.

Seph moved alongside her and slipped his hand in hers. "So if this new brand works, you'll be going back to Earth? Assuming your idea works for regaining your brands."

"Just for a while longer, until we can get all the Tradehall survivors out of the city."

He nodded, but kept silent. She stopped so she could kiss him gently on the lips. "I know you're worried. But I won't let Cain take me."

"I guess..." he looked like he didn't know quite what to say. "Perhaps I'm a bit selfish," he said finally.

"Selfish? You?" Jak almost laughed.

"I've wanted you back from the moment you left. And...and I can't stand the idea of you leaving again." His face didn't necessarily match what he said, but Jak could tell there were some very strong emotions buried beneath that calm facade.

"And you feel helpless?"

"I guess I do. Though I've managed to get a lot of preaching in since you left. The people here are much more receptive to what I have to teach."

Jak chuckled. "That's because they're literally part of the fulfillment of prophecy."

Seph cracked a smile at her, that dazzling smile that she loved so much. "I suppose that's true. That does make it easier."

Jak kissed him again. "Don't worry, you have a greater purpose here, even beyond the lessons you teach." Where had that statement come from? She had no idea what purpose Seph would have in the future. But something about it felt right.

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that," said Seph. "Remember when we were on Mt. Knot and I had that kind of...connection with the dragon?"

"I remember it vividly."

"Well I can't help but wonder if there was more to that. I'd love to see that dragon again, if only to see if I can establish that connection once more."

"And hopefully not get burned alive in the process," said Jak, raising her eyebrows. But she could admit that had been a strange experience, and not one that had any explanation yet. "Maybe you're some kind of Dragon Fae," she said, almost teasing.

But Seph almost seemed to take her seriously. “Yeah, maybe something like that. Perhaps that’s why I wasn’t supposed to take a brand.”

“Other people with brands have become Fae.”

“Yeah, it was just a thought. I’m still unsure about a lot of things.”

Jak wrapped her arms around him. “Well I’m sure of one thing, that I love you, and I *will* come back for you when this is over. I promise you plenty of...alone time.”

Seph grinned, “I’ll hold you to that. You have a lot to make up to me.”

“Yep, don’t you worry,” Jak felt her mood improve, and she smiled up at Seph before kissing him once more.

Just at that moment, Skellig returned, with a young woman with long and straight blonde hair trailing behind her. Jak recognized the girl as one of the Gifters that had hung around Gabriel before he died. Kali? No, Kalina. That was her name.

“This is Kalina,” Skellig confirmed. “She’s agreed to help you.”

Jak felt her anticipation rise, and she fumbled desperate in her

pouch for the folded piece of parchment. She found it and handed it to Kalina. “Can you brand this? It’s called the Anti-Void brand. You have to envision fullness when you do it.”

The girl took the piece of paper. “I can’t brand you, I’m only able to perform one brand on a person.”

“Here,” Skellig offered a leather strap she must have brought specially for the occasion. “Try it on this first.”

The girl took the strap, hesitantly before looking up at Jak. “Fullness you say?”

Jak nodded.

Kalina took a deep breath and closed her eyes. Jak leaned in, and noticed Skellig and Seph unconsciously doing the same.

Kalina’s Gifter brand flared to life, just as her eyes snapped open. In her other hand Kalina held the drawing of the Anti-Void brand, she studied it closely, and Jak could make out black lines beginning to etch themselves into the dark leather. It was working. The Gifter was forming the brand.

She watched, riveted as the lines connected and completed themselves in the leather. Finally, Kalina’s Gifter brand died down, and she took a moment to observe her handywork. “I did as you said, though I don’t know if it will work or not.”

Jak raised her hand, trying her best to stop it from shaking. “May I see it?”

The girl handed her the brand, and Jak took it with a soft touch, as if expecting it to disintegrate in front of her. But the leather showed no sign of change, which was a good thing. Usually when a brand went wrong, something would happen to the object. Like it would catch fire or dissolve. But none of that was happening now.

Barely daring to hope, she took the strap and wrapped it around her right wrist, tucking the end under itself so it wouldn’t come loose. She pulled it tight.

And stars erupted in front of her eyes. Suddenly, she was ten times

stronger than she felt a moment ago. Wells of power flooded into her, and all feelings of hunger or fatigue left her body. Her eyes opened wide, and she laughed. It was the most joyful sound she had ever made.

Without another thought, she launched herself into the air. The Telekinesis brand on her forehead blazed to life as she used it to propel herself upward. She shot above the treeline, above the mountains, till she could see for miles in every direction.

And Relics, Illadar was beautiful. The greenery didn't stretch in all directions yet, but remained isolated to a few miles surrounding the camp, but it wouldn't be long before that changed. And was that an ocean she could make out in the distance? Where was that, south? She would have to tell the Water Fae.

But just as she had risen, she allowed herself to fall, reveling in the euphoria of finally having control again. Tears streamed from her eyes and flew into the sky as she fell straight towards the ground.

She only barely cushioned her fall with Telekinesis, instead allowing her Toughness brand to absorb most of the impact. Everyone was there to meet her, every member of the council crowding around her. But she only had eyes for Seph, who grabbed her in a giant hug. She did the same, being careful not to squeeze as hard as she was able. She would have to get used to having her Strength brand again.

"You did it," he whispered in her ear. "I love you."

She said nothing in return, but only enjoyed the feeling of her head on his chest.

When she broke the embrace, she faced Kamila. "Thank you so much," she said through her tears. "You...have no idea." She couldn't say more.

"You're welcome, lady Oren," said Kamila. Her face was flushed, but happy. Jak would have to reward the woman later. She'd give the Gifter every last brand she wanted. But now there were other matters to attend to.

"First things first," she said, raising her own hands in front of her. "Let's see if we can make this new brand more permanent." She touched her left hand to the back of her right palm, right beneath where the Void brand lay. Then she concentrated.

Her own Gifter brand flared to life as she activated it. Then she pictured the new brand, a circle with a four-pointed star in the center, followed by another circle within that. As she imagined the shape, she also envisioned a feeling of fullness, of completion.

She barely noticed the slight pain in her right wrist as the new brand took shape just below the Void brand. When it was done, she took off the leather strap. Her powers remained. The Anti-Void brand was now a permanent part of her.

“Okay,” she said, feeling better than ever. “Now to business.”



“SO YOU AND SEPH?” said Naem, as they walked away from the camp. Only Jak, Naem, and Li were going back, as Jak didn’t want to risk anyone else in the extraction plan.

“We, uh, got married,” she said, with a little schagrin. “It all happened kind of fast. I was about to get in a fight to the death with Vander...”

“Wait, what?” exclaimed Naem. “What happened with him?”

“It’s a long story. Anyway, Seph and I realized that we loved each other and didn’t want to put it off. And honestly I think that was what got me through the fight. It gave me the motivation I needed.”

“I see,” said Naem. He continued walking without looking at her.

“I’m sorry, Naem.” She said after a moment. “I know you cared about me, and I care for you too. I just...it’s not in that way anymore.”

“No, I understand,” he said, still not looking at her. “And I knew the two of you were together, I just didn’t realize it would...cement itself so quickly.”

“I don’t think we did either.”

“Well I guess that’s as good of a reason to move on as any,” he said, finally turning to look at her, and cracking a forced smile. “I suppose that Gifter girl was kind of pretty.”

Jak shook her head. Men. Were they all so needy? It was like they were insecure if they didn’t have someone who loved them around constantly. Like they needed constant reassurance that they were wanted.

Li seemed to be thinking the same thing, for she smiled and went back to staring at the ground in front of her, shaking her head slightly. Li had spent the last hour conversing with some of the other Nature Fae, but came the moment Jak said it was time to leave.

“So I guess I’d better give these back to you.” he said, holding out the Pillars of Eternity towards her while they walked.

Jak reached one hand out to touch the polished surface of the Pillars. A slight sensation rushed through her as she did so. It wasn’t anything as pronounced as a voice, but she could have sworn she felt a distinct communication, welcoming her back.

“No, you keep them,” said Jak. “I’ll be off fighting Cain. I need you to use these to get around the city and create a portal for every survivor to come back here to Illadar.”

Jak stopped walking then, they were far enough out from the camp that they could safely create all the portals they needed, while still

within sight of the others.

“How will I know where to find all those people?” said Naem.

“I will guide you,” said Li. “Cain burned much of what I built, but there should still be enough that I can sense the others. If not, give me some time and I can rebuild the network.”

“And that will be my job,” Jak said. “To give you all the time you need.”

Naem met her eyes. “Are you sure you can take him head on? Don’t be offended but you haven’t exactly lasted long against him before.”

Li was nodding, “You even said you could not fight him directly when we were in the valley. Has anything changed?”

“Not necessarily,” said Jak. “Though I have come to a greater understanding and appreciation for what I have, since then. But I’m not trying to fight him, I’m trying to distract him. That much, I think I can do.”

“I hope you’re right,” said Naem.

Jak met his eyes. “If you would open a portal back to Earth, I would appreciate that. Right back in the center of the Tradehall palace will do.”

He took a deep breath and slowly inclined his head. “Let’s see if I can pull this off a second time.”

He closed his eyes, then opened them with a snap. A giant purple circle expanded in front of them, its shimmering energy crackling and buzzing with power.

“Let’s go,” said Jak, raising her voice to be heard above the sound of the portal.

Together, the three of them stepped through.

They arrived on the other side to nearly complete darkness. They were in the palace’s main hall, as Jak had directed, and it was pitch black. But the area wasn’t silent. Though there appeared to be nothing happening in the hall itself, sounds of chaos rained around them, and a scent of wood smoke filled the air.

Jak turned, barely able to make out the others in the dark, though her Sightseer brand helped a bit. “Naem, you said there are people being held in the palace dungeons?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, you should start there. I’m not sure how many are left in the city, but we can start with what we know. Li, you can begin reconnecting with the plants that haven’t burned up yet. Focus on the sewers. There are probably many still left in there. Possibly trapped.”

“I will start at once,” said Li.

“And Naem,” Jak added. “Whatever you do, do not let Cain regain possession of the Pillars of Eternity. Use the Pillar of Time if you have

to. He won't be able to touch you if you move faster than he can see."

"I will," he said.

Well that was all she had left to say. Turning, she strode to the end of the large room, to where the enormous double doors waited to be opened. She reached out to the smaller, wicket door, and pulled.

She blinked to see the entire city was awash in flames. Some had begun to die down, but most were still generating flames that stretched high into the sky. Was Cain even still here? He would have realized by now that Jak had escaped with the Pillars of Eternity. She was honestly surprised that he hadn't burned down the entire palace in anger.

She took several steps forward, searching the skies for any sign of the demon king, when she heard a cry coming from around a corner. Jak created a small telekinetic bubble to stave off the smoke, and ran to see where the sound had come from.

When she rounded the corner, she saw two figures, one lying on the ground, writhing in obvious pain, the other bent over the first, a knife in hand, literally peeling off the man's skin.

The man on the ground cried out again, and Jak realized who it was. That was Marek.

"You let the girl live, when I gave you specific instructions to kill her the moment the Void brand took hold. You had that chance and you let her live instead!" It was Cain speaking. He was torturing Marek for his failure to kill her. What would Cain do if he knew that Marek had also been responsible for her reclaiming the Pillars of Eternity and Naem?

"I told you it was a momentary lapse in judgement. A shadow of my former life." Though he was in obvious pain, Marek's voice did not show it. He said the words as calmly as if he and Cain were talking over lunch.

"And yet if she had been dead, we wouldn't be in this position, would we!" Cain emphasized his words by cutting into Marek once again. Marek reacted by crying out once more, though he tried to keep it in this time.

It was time to put an end to this.

Jak stepped forward. "Cain," she said in a clear tone. The demon king whirled to see who had spoken. His eyes widened upon seeing her. "I believe you've been looking for me."

Without giving him more time to react, she rose into the air using her Telekinesis brand.

"Impossible," he said, beneath her. "You had a Void brand."

"Would that stop you?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. Then she sped upward, away from Cain, and away from the city entirely. She needed to get Cain away from Tradehall in order to give Naem and Li enough time to find the remaining survivors.

"Come back here!" yelled Cain, and Jak glanced back to see him launch himself in her direction.

"Come and get me," she taunted. Then, with a massive tug on her Flamedancer brand, she pulled at all the flames that lay beneath them, gathering as much of the fire from the city as she could, and gathered it all together in one giant fireball, contained within a telekinetic wall.

The flames rushed past Cain as they coalesced in front of Jak. But rather than send it back down at the monster, she flew further, dragging the giant fireball with her. She had to get Cain away from the city.

He was flying close to her now, but they were finally far enough away from the city that Jak felt comfortable throwing the fireball back at Cain. With a massive effort involving both her Telekinetic and Flamedancer brands, she launched the great ball of flames directly at her enemy.

Cain did not slow, he did not even dodge out of the way. The fireball hit him with a thunderous boom that rippled across the plains outside of Tradehall. Jak spared a moment to see what it had done. But Cain flew through the dissipating flames as though they were not there. The explosion had only slowed him down temporarily.

Well that was fine, Jak had been expecting that. Time for her next move. She shot a jet of fire at the man as he approached, knowing it would do no good, but that wasn't really why she did it. Instead, the jet of flame sent her flying even faster than before, straight up into the clouds.

It wasn't stormy, but most of the sky was overcast. Perhaps she

could get lost in the clouds and attack Cain when he wasn't expecting it.

But Cain was almost on her now. A warm light increasing in intensity against the clouds warned her of an incoming fireball. She dodged out of the way just in time as the flaming ball passed into the clouds, clearing a path through the mist as it went.

Then a vice-like grip surrounded her. Broken Brands, he was using Telekinesis on her. And he was strong. She halted in her escape, frozen in mid-air by Cain's mental hold.

"I will not allow someone such as you to ruin plans that I have developed for centuries," he said, coming even with her.

"Your plans will never work, even if you kill me," said Jak sounding far braver than she felt, trapped in a telekinetic lock.

He tilted his head at her. "Your reasoning?"

"Because you do nothing but push people away. Just look at what you were doing to Marek. You want people to follow you? To worship you? That will never happen as long as you keep up the role of evil dictator with no charisma."

"You know nothing of which you speak. Fear and dominance are sufficient to rule far more than you could by 'kindness' or 'loyalty'." He said the words like he was mocking her. "Your techniques may grant you a few followers. But that will never be enough to rule a world."

"You might be surprised," Jak said, softly. Almost to herself.

Cain began tightening his hold on her. Relics, but he was strong. How did he gain so much strength? What were his brands?

Jak squinted to get a good look at the lines that criss-crossed all over Cain's torso, but in the darkness, even with her Sightseer brand, it wasn't easy to tell.

Whatever Cain was doing, he was about to crush Jak's ribs, and she needed a way out, fast. So she did the only thing that came to mind.

She put Cain in her own Telekinetic hold.

The constraint on her body lessened somewhat, though more from Cain's surprise than from anything Jak was doing. Cain's arms snapped to his sides as Jak pressed with all her mental energy. Not only that, but she hurled him downward with her mind. Perhaps if she could get him away from her, he might just lose his control over the telekinetic grip that held her.

It was working, somewhat. She could feel the pressure lessening. She sent some flames down at Cain for good measure, hoping to distract him even more. Then she pushed outward with all her strength.

The telekinetic barrier shattered, and she gasped as her lungs were

unrestrained once more.

That had been too close. And there was nothing stopping Cain from doing the same thing once again. He would be prepared for her counterattack the next time. She flew upward again, desperate to reach the clouds before he could find her.

Darkness surrounded her, and she turned in midair to see a shadowy form approaching. She had seen this before. In the depths of Mt. Harafast, he had appeared like this, a giant shadow monster with icy blue eyes in the depths of its darkness.

Despite herself, she swallowed. What kind of brand was this, and what would it do? Could she even fight Cain in this form?

"YOU TOOK SOMETHING FROM ME!" His voice was a bellowing roar that filled the air around her. It seemed to fill the entire plane. Everyone from here to Foothold must be hearing it. "YOU WILL GIVE THEM BACK."

Suddenly a thought occurred to Jak, and she nearly laughed out loud. Cain wanted to kill her, yes. But to him, she was also the only one who knew what happened to the Pillars of Eternity. Would he risk killing her if she might be the only one who knew where they were?

Jak sent another jet of fire in Cain's direction, even though she wasn't sure it would do anything against his current form. It didn't. The fire only seemed to aggravate him further, the darkness swooping in to consume her.

She couldn't keep this up for long. She either had to hurt Cain in some way, or escape from him completely. And she couldn't do that before Naem was done getting the rest of the rebels and prisoners out of Tradehall.

She spared a glance for the city, which was dark now that she had extracted most of the flames. How was Naem faring? She could see no evidence of his activities anywhere, though something told her he had left the palace and was now searching the sewers for any final survivors.

How did she know that?

Before she could ponder the question, she sensed Cain draw even closer. A hand caught her leg, and pulled her down. The telekinetic hold simultaneously reappeared and flattened her arms to her sides. The hand that held her suddenly burned, and a powerful jolt of energy passed through her body. Cain was using a Thunder brand on her.

The energy was enough to make her lose her concentration. She fell, carried in Cain's grasp, down down until...

She hit the ground with a thud that shook every bone in her body. Only her Toughness brand kept her from becoming a broken pile of shattered bones. All her breath was knocked out, and Cain stood atop her, no longer in his shadowy form. They were still outside Tradehall,

but not by much. They had to be only two-hundred yards or so from the nearest city wall.

“Where did you take them?” he said, his voice a deadly growl, his eyes flashing a bright blue.

“If you kill me, you’ll never find out.”

“You had to have brought them here. You can’t escape without them.”

“You and I both know there could be ways around that.” Which was true. She didn’t necessarily need the Pillars to be with her in order to get back to Illadar. Someone else could open a portal from Illadar, maybe at a pre-appointed place and time. Jak admitted that would have been a good plan, if they didn’t have people to get out of the city.

Cain narrowed his eyes, and some of the brands on his body flashed for a moment. Jak could make out the Telekinetic brand, the one he was using to partially hold her in place, alight in the night. But there were others too. Many brands all up and down his body. She had seen it before, but never got a good look until now. Some she recognized. There was a Strength brand, and a Healing brand. And...was that another Healing brand?

“You escaped me just hours ago,” said Cain, almost as if to himself. “You would not have come back without a reason...” he trailed off. Jak swallowed. He was figuring it out. She had to stop him, distract him.

She pushed against his telekinetic shield, but in response, he hit her with another jolt from his Thunder brand, which caused every muscle in her body to spasm. That wasn’t fair. She had used Thunder against him on top of Mt. Knot and it hadn’t worked. He had seemingly absorbed it into himself.

“You’re not powerful enough to kill me,” he said, still speaking as though he were thinking out loud. “Which means you must be trying to distract me, so that...” His eyes flashed at her, and she knew he had figured it out. “There are others. They have the Pillars!”

It was like he’d forgotten all about her. The telekinetic hold on her body released, and Cain flew into the air, heading over the city wall.

“N
o,” she said as she scrambled to her feet and flew after

him. She caught him by one leg, just as he had done to her moments earlier. She tried to wrap him in her own telekinetic hold, but he broke that almost as soon as she set it in place. The man was strong.

Suddenly a bright orange shape swooped at her from one side. She dodged out of the way just in time to avoid a collision. Her eyes grew wide as she realized what had attacked her out of nowhere. It was the dragon.

The giant beast’s orange, scaly hide seemed to gleam unnaturally in the darkness. It roared, an earth-shaking sound that left Jak’s ears ringing. How had it come here so suddenly? And where had it come from? Anyone in the area could have seen a dragon coming from miles away. Had she really been so distracted while fighting Cain that she had missed it?

Its jaws opened, its stomach glowed, and a torrent of fire gushed out of its mouth, right at her. She dodged, but felt the heat of the flames as they rushed by her.

This wasn’t good. Cain was getting away, and there was no way she could go up against a dragon. Especially not if it was allied with Cain. The dragon had once fought against Cain but that had been before, and it appeared the man had somehow trained the dragon. Jak had fought it briefly on Mt. Knot, and there was no creature more powerful.

She zoomed into the air, straight at the dragon. Perhaps if she couldn’t fight it head on, she could confuse it, or get out of its range of fire. And as crazy as it might have sounded, she could think of no safer place than right behind it.

She whipped past the dragon, who followed her with its beady eyes. But it wasn’t as fast as she was, and soon enough she was behind it, turning to come to rest on its back. Perhaps if she could just hold onto its neck, she could stay safe long enough to figure out what to do.

But as her hands connected with the scales of its back, they passed

right through the creature. What? She was so shocked, she looked down at her hands and didn't even notice as the dragon turned itself in midair with incredible speed and immediately launched another jet of fire at her.

The flames passed right through her, and though Jak could feel their warmth, they did nothing to burn her flesh.

Had she somehow gained the ability to pass through solid objects? No, that wasn't right. Perhaps there was something wrong with the dragon.

She reached out for the huge beast, this time with her mind. A telekinetic hold wouldn't do much against the dragon, but perhaps she could get a sense of...

Her mind felt nothing. It was like the dragon did not even exist. She couldn't get a hold of it, not with her mind or her body.

Cain. He had tricked her! That thing he did when he turned into a sort of dark presence, that must be fake as well. He must have some kind of brand that allowed him to create illusions.

Broken brands, that meant he now had a solid lead on her, and she had let him go to fight nothing.

She hurtled through the air, passing right through the monstrous form of the dragon, ignoring it entirely. She searched the ground for Cain, but didn't find him anywhere. However...

An unsettling feeling remained in the pit of her stomach. A slight awareness that always accompanied her interactions with Cain. And there was something about it that helped to pinpoint where he was.

He was below her, but not far.

The sewers.

She dived towards the nearest canal. That must be where he was, and something told her that's where Naman and Li were as well. There were probably survivors nearby. She had to get to them before Cain did.

Fire exploded out of one of the sewer tunnels just as she arrived. As she drew close enough to peer inside, she saw the distant form of Cain barreling through a tangle of vines and thorns, fire raging before him as he both burned and broke the plant life in front of him.

Good, Li was actively trying to fend him off. It wouldn't be enough though. She would need Jak's help to keep Cain occupied.

All but forgetting her own safety, she hurtled down the tunnel after him. Then at exactly the same time, she both wrapped him in a telekinetic hold and physically grabbed him in a Strength-enhanced headlock.

Cain yelled, more in frustration than anything else. Jak heaved, trying to drag him out of the sewers and away from Naem and Li, and whoever else they were helping.

Cain's next reaction was to turn into that mist of darkness that had scared her so much the first time she'd met him. In an instant she felt him disappear from her grip, though her hands stayed where they were. But no, that was nothing but an illusion. He hadn't disappeared from her grasp. It only felt that way. Which meant she was still holding him.

She clamped down her arms even further, enough that she would have crushed the body of an ordinary man. The misty darkness vanished, and Cain reappeared in her grip once more. Jak focused every ounce of physical and mental energy into keeping him locked down.

Cain exploded with strength. Her grip failed as he pushed her back with his arms, and a momentary headache raced through her head as he tore through her telekinetic grip.

How was the man so strong? No Strength brand could have bested her like that. Not a single Strength brand anyway. She tried to make out the dark lines on his body once again. She had thought she saw more than one Healing brand before. Could there be more Strength brands too? Was it really that simple?

Before she could get a good look, Cain sped down the tunnel once more, again tearing through the many vines that rose to meet him. Jak raced after him but as she began to catch up, Cain burst into a more open chamber.

There stood Naem and Li, the latter facing Cain, but the former holding open a portal while several people Jak didn't know went through it. Both of the Pillars of Eternity glowed with a magic of their own as the portal stood open for everyone to pass through it.

"Naem!" Jak shouted as she caught sight of him. He had to use the Pillar of Time to get out of there. Maybe he couldn't while he was holding the portal open.

Cain did not waste time. He dove at Naem, reaching both hands and all but ignoring two large vine tentacles that swatted at him as he drew closer.

Jak redoubled her speed, but knew the moment she did so that it was too late. She wouldn't be able to get to Cain in time, and her mind was still throbbing from the telekinetic grip Cain had just broken.

She did the only thing that came to her mind. She raised one finger and called on her Thunder brand. Hopefully it took concentration for Cain to absorb that energy. Perhaps if he wasn't paying attention...

A bolt of electricity shot from her finger, crackled through the air, and hit Cain directly in the back.

He fell to the ground, each of his muscles twitching uncontrollably. Jak met Naem's eyes. "Get out of here!"

Naem nodded and the portal dropped. There were still several people left to transport across, but that would have to wait. In a single instant, Naem sped up so fast that Jak couldn't see him move. She could feel the wind buffet around her, however, and everyone else in the room disappeared as he undoubtedly took them into his time bubble and moved them away at dizzying speeds. It was almost as good as using the portal itself to get away.

Cain screamed and turned to throw himself at Jak. Instinctively she threw up a telekinetic shield, and Cain barrelled into it. He summoned an enormous fireball and hurled it at Jak. The entire ceiling of the sewers exploded as the fireball met her shield, the pressure mounting and creating a explosive bubble of brick and wood, expanding outward and upward.

Jak's shield buckled, and rubble rained down around her, covering her body, some of it scraping at her skin. Soon she was covered in the collapsed sewer.

Using her Strength and Telekinesis, she pushed aside the rubble, tilting her head to gaze down at her body, noticing a number of scrapes and bruises. That had been a powerful blast to hurt her that much, considering she had a Toughness brand to take the brunt of it.

"He will not elude me for long. I can already feel where he has taken the others," said Cain. Jak frowned, but realized that she could kind of feel it too. Naem was on the other side of the city now, but he had stopped. If Cain could instinctively feel the same thing, that could be a problem. She would have to work even harder to keep him from reaching Naem. "But first," he continued. "I am going to rip the flesh off your bones."

His eyes flashed and he launched himself at Jak. Oddly enough, it wasn't her powers that saved her this time, but her training. She threw herself backward, kicking out with both feet just as he reached the spot where she had been a moment before. The kick did little to keep him from coming, but it did divert his path of motion just enough to send him flying overtop.

Before he could change direction, she shot back up into the sky. Cain followed with incredible speed. He wasn't fooling around now. He knew the Pillars of Eternity were with Naem, and that meant he didn't need her to find them. All he had to do was eliminate her, and he probably wouldn't have a hard time finding Naem eventually. Which meant this time he really was trying to kill her.

She cursed as another telekinetic hold wrapped around her. It stopped her in mid flight, and he was on her in seconds. A hand wrapped around her throat.

"This is our final conflict." Cain's voice whispered in her ear, as he held her completely helpless. His hand tightened and she gasped for

air. "I admit I still wish you had elected to join me all those months ago. But I shouldn't worry. There will be others." With that, his hand closed even tighter around her windpipe.

Jak gasped, but there was no air to be had. Even with Toughness, he was going to break her neck at any moment. She tried burning him, but that did nothing, tried her Telekinesis, but she couldn't concentrate enough to bring the more powerful magic to bear.

An instinct took over, and she remembered a time when she had been in a similar situation, when Kuldain had also held her by the neck, and she had subsequently branded him with a faulty Flamedancer brand, one that had caused him to burn alive.

Without thinking, she activated her Gifter brand and directed the magic through to Cain. She envisioned the Flamedancer brand, but not perfectly. She did it exactly as she had before she mastered the brand.

In a flash before Cain could react, the brand formed and settled itself into Cain's flesh. At the same time, something else happened. A familiar brand lit up on Cain's shoulder, a circle with a star and another circle inside. It was the Anti-Void brand.

Cain began to laugh. "Do you think I'm so easily defeated with something as simple as a faulty brand. I see you learned the secret of the Anti-brand, but it can do more than just give you back your powers. It allows me to negate the effects of any brand I want."

That was when Jak realized, being this close to Cain, that the Anti-Void brand, or the Anti-brand as Cain called it, was all over Cain's body. There were dozens of them, most of them quite small, taking up a sizeable portion of the marks on his body. It only confirmed what Jak had thought she saw before. Cain had multiple copies of the same brand. Each of these Anti-brands must act like some kind of insurance, in case he came across someone with a Void brand, or if someone tried to give him a brand he didn't want.

"Now, you will die," Cain said with a smile.

With that he hurtled toward the ground, dragging Jak with him. She struggled, trying to bring her magic to bear, but she couldn't breathe, and her concentration was waning. But she had to get out, she had to. This wasn't how it was supposed to end. She was supposed to keep him distracted until Naem was ready for her, and then she would fly through the portal and get away before Cain could come after her.

That was her last thought before the entirety of Cain's physical strength, and all of his mental, telekinetic force, smashed her into the ground.

H_{er} chest heaved, but came up with nothing. Blood spurted

from her mouth. Her brain was foggy, but she could have sworn that nearly every bone in her body was broken. Her lungs were probably crushed. The fact that she was conscious was something of a miracle, though she could imagine that wouldn't last for very much longer.

Cain stood over her, a look of satisfaction on his face. "Goodbye, Jak," he said, before turning away and walking out of her field of vision.

She was dying. She knew it, and Cain knew it. Her vision was blurring. Her Healing brand would not bring her back from this one. Not when every organ in her chest had been crushed by Cain's attack. She tried again to breathe, but she did nothing but choke, her chest spasming up and down. Her vision swam, the feeling in her legs tingled and faded.

She was going to die. This was the moment, and she had failed. She had failed Naem, and everyone else left in Tradehall. She had failed the people of Illadar, including her own husband. She had...

Wait. Cain had multiple Healing brands. They had kept him alive even when facing a dragon in an exploding volcano. Could she do the same?

With the last of her conscious thought, she willed her Gifter brand to activate. Her willpower was weak, but Healing brands were fairly simple. She did her best to imagine one and touched her left hand to her leg, where the torn fabric had exposed part of her flesh, all before falling into unconsciousness.

Her eyes snapped open, her momentary blackout ending the moment the Healing brand took hold. She was still dying, she could feel it. But the extra Healing brand was doing something. It was like an extra dose of adrenaline, keeping her awake.

Again.

She touched her leg a second time, imagining the Healing brand once more. A third copy of the brand settled into her flesh. She felt something. She could breathe now, just a little, but enough that she

began gulping for air. Her punctured lungs were stitching themselves together.

Again.

Once more, she gave herself another brand, her fourth Healing brand. This time, once the brand had become part of her, she felt an enormously uncomfortable sensation as her bones began straightening by themselves, fusing back together. Her breathing was coming easier now, and her insides no longer felt like someone had gone inside and stirred them up with a cook's spoon.

It took a few moments for all of her bones to knit back together, but when it was done, she lay on the ground, her leather armor and clothing torn in multiple places, dirt and rubble covering her body. But she was alive, and she was completely whole.

She sprang to her feet, no longer feeling a semblance of fatigue.

Cain had not noticed what had happened. He was already gone, leaving her for dead and flying off towards the spot where Naem had to be. Jak thought she could feel him there as well, something like instinct directing where she had to go.

She shot into the sky, following the same path that Cain must have just taken. Naem was somewhere on the south side of the city, near the gates. Her eyes quickly found what she was looking for.

Naem held open a portal while several people went through. Li was with him, but they were otherwise alone. The last of the survivors had just disappeared inside the portal. Cain was flying right towards him. Unlike before, Naem didn't quite have enough time to close the portal and activate the Pillar of Time in order to get away.

Cain barreled into Naem, clutching at the two Pillars in his hands. Naem held back but his strength was nothing against Cain. The man ripped the two Pillars out of Naem's grip.

And that was when Jak arrived.

Just as Cain had done to Naem, Jak slammed into the demon king, her hands reaching to grasp the two Pillars of Eternity.

Cain's eyes widened as he saw who had hit him. "How?" he said, incredulously.

"I took a lesson from you, Cain."

Then she spoke to the Pillars of Eternity, tapping into their magic. If she could use them now, she could take Cain away from here, drop him from the highest mountain or over the largest ocean, much as she had after their encounter on Mt. Knot.

But something was different this time. Cain was holding onto the Pillars as well, and she could feel his will fighting back at her. He was trying to seize control from her.

She concentrated, though that concentration waned as they crashed to the ground, both of them too involved in their struggle of

wills to continue to keep themselves in the air with Telekinesis.

She tried to open a portal, communicating with the Pillars as she had done before, months ago now, to travel between Earth and Illadar. But Cain fought back. He was mentally attacking the Pillars, wearing them down. Something was different about the Relics than the last time Jak had used them. They were...tired. Cain had already brought them to the brink of breaking, and this struggle was not helping.

Jak pressed her lips together and pulled, both physically and mentally on the two staffs. She had to get them away, or Cain would break them soon. She could feel it. Like a captive spy being tortured for information, all it took was time to cause them to break. The same would be true of the Pillars of Eternity.

With a burst of mental effort, Jak willed the Pillars to form a portal. A shining disk of energy appeared to one side, though this one was smaller, weaker. It flickered in the night.

“GO!” Jak yelled to Naem and Li. If she could only save them, then that’s what she would do.

Naem and Li did not hesitate. They ran through the portal just as Jak struggled to keep it open.

“You will not take my prize from me,” Cain growled.

She did not respond, the effort of holding him off was all she could concentrate on. This time, she needed to break his physical hold on the Pillars. If he would let go, perhaps she could get through the portal before it broke.

With the last of her energy, she formed a Telekinetic fist and sent it flying at Cain, with the intention of breaking his grip on the staffs. But at that same moment, Cain did something similar, sending a burst of telekinetic energy at her. The two forces collided between them, and exploded in all directions.

Jak was hurled backward, as was Cain, their grips on the Pillars momentarily shaken. But Jak could do nothing as she fell backwards through her own portal, with one, and only one Pillar of Eternity in her hand.

She landed on soft ground, tumbled backward, and rolled several times before she came to a halt. She was on Illadar, and here the sun was high in the sky. But the portal closed behind her, and all she had in her hands was one Pillar of Eternity, a gleaming bar of white with black runes inscribed down its length. The Pillar of Space.

They had lost the Pillar of Time.

“Y

ou did everything you could have done,” Seph said, his arm around Jak as they sat on a rock, observing the trees. It was several hours later, Jak had briefed everyone in the council, but couldn’t help feeling like everything had fallen apart.

“I lost the Pillar of Time,” she mumbled. “And you weren’t there, Seph. It was on the brink of giving in to Cain’s pressure. He’ll break it soon, and claim the power for himself, if he hasn’t already. Do you have any idea how hard it will be to take it from him, or to fight him at all, once he has that power?”

“You have the Pillar of Space,” replied Seph. “And you got Naem back, and all the others, not to mention your own powers.”

Jak leaned her head on his shoulder. “I know,” she said after some time listening to his breathing. “And I learned something new about some of his brands. Yes, he has a few that we don’t know about, but he can also compound brands to provide double the power.”

“I’m honestly surprised we didn’t think of that sooner,” Seph remarked.

Jak shrugged. “Until recently, we didn’t even know that multiple brands were possible. We’ve been so stuck in a one-brand mindset that I’m not surprised.”

“So I presume you’ll be giving yourself more Strength brands and such?”

“Maybe,” she licked her lips. “It’s hard to know what that could do to a person. What if I became so strong that I don’t know my own strength. I could hurt you or someone else without thinking about it.”

“You don’t do that now.”

“Only because I have practiced.”

“Well Cain has lived with it up to this point. I’m sure with more of that practice, you can make it work.”

Jak stared off into the forest, watching as new leaves and ferns bloomed before her eyes. The nature here was vibrant, guided by the ministerings of the Nature Fae. Jak wasn’t even sure what she would have done without Li’s help in Tradehall. And now she, and her Fae

companions were reshaping Illadar to be a place of true prosperity. It was now a world of raw, unlimited potential for growth.

"I'm not sure anyone should have all that power, to be honest," she continued. "Power is not good for the soul."

"Of that much, I am certain," Seph confirmed. "But the very fact that you recognize that is a good sign. I trust you."

She leaned into him, "I know you do, and I love you for it."

"There is one thing that bothered me though," he said, changing the subject. "The dragon. Why wasn't it there? The real one I mean."

Jak mulled over the question. It was true that the beast had been mysteriously absent, other than the illusion Cain had conjured. It had served Cain at Mt. Knot, so there was no reason to think it had left. Perhaps Cain had sent it elsewhere.

"I don't know," she finally admitted. "You do seem to like that dragon."

"I just want to understand the connection we once shared," he replied.

"Well," said Jak, smiling slightly and leaning into him. "I'd rather focus on our connection for a little while."

He grinned, "I think I can spare the time."

They stayed in that position for a while, Jak simply enjoying the rising and falling of his chest. Despite everything that had happened, and her loss of the Pillar of time, she was glad to be back. Glad to be in Seph's arms for another night.



THE NEXT DAY she helped arrange accommodations for the newcomers. Overall, Naem had brought in nearly two hundred people, scattered around Tradehall. Li had been able to sniff them out, though unfortunately there had been many more who had perished.

In the end, they decided on a small patch of land near the lake. Jak went with them to help set up their makeshift houses. For Jak, that wasn't a problem at all. Using her Telekinesis brand, she managed to drag most of the materials to the spot, stacking enough stones to create four walls within minutes. The others helped cement the stones together and add a roof, but it didn't take very long, in part because Jak did most of the heavy lifting. Naman, Jamilla, Raine, even the Royal Priest were all pitching in, excited to be in their new home, away from Cain.

On a break, she ran up to the water, hoping to find Amelia. She hadn't spoken to her friend in weeks now, and now that Raine had been reunited with her daughter, they surely had a lot to talk about.

“Jak!” came Amelia’s cheerful voice from further in the lake. With a soft splash Amelia propelled herself forward until she was right up against the bank. “I was hoping you’d drop by. I can’t thank you enough for finding my mom!”

Jak smiled but shrugged. “It was a team effort. It was actually Naem who made the portal. I just...you know, saved his life.”

“Yeah you did, you all-powerful blessed lady Oren you,” said Amelia. She said it with a wink, and Jak couldn’t help but smile some more. She didn’t normally like it when people called her lady Oren, but Amelia made it sound almost comical. She needed that.

“How was your reunion with Raine?” she asked.

“Oh, Jak. It was so wonderful. Can you believe she had no idea what happened to me since I went away for school. If you hadn’t told her that I had become a Water Fae, I think she might have fainted at the sight of me.”

“She’s okay with it, right?” Jak said, feeling a slight tug of worry.

“Oh yeah, you don’t have to worry about that. She was fine. I think it was just...different for her, you know? But she’d seen some Shadow Elves before, and I think Li really warmed her up to the idea of changing into Fae.”

“Well that’s a relief.”

“I know, right!” said Amelia enthusiastically. “She’s living here with the rest of the newcomers. So she said she’s going to visit me every day.”

“I’m really happy for you, Amelia,” said Jak.

She meant it, though from the look on Amelia’s face, perhaps she had given the wrong idea. Amelia frowned and said, “I’m sorry, Jak. I know your parents are gone and all that. I didn’t mean to seem insensitive. Please don’t be mad at me.”

Jak laughed softly. “Amelia I’m not mad. I would be a lousy friend if I wasn’t happy for you just because I don’t have living parents of my own. If anything, I should be more happy for you.”

“Perhaps a little envious sometimes,” said a voice behind her. She turned to see Naem walking toward them. His hands were dirty, and there was sweat on his face. He had probably been helping to build some of the houses. “But I grew up most of my life without parents, so I’m not even that sure if I would like it or not.”

Amelia eyed Naem for a moment, saying nothing. Jak knew what she was thinking. Amelia had blamed Naem for his previous betrayal of Jak at Skyecliff, and hadn’t really forgiven him for that, even when Jak had welcomed Naem back into their group.

But there was something different this time, and Jak raised her eyebrows at Amelia to try and remind her.

“Um...” said Amelia. “Thank you for helping my mom to come

back.” She forced the words out, but Jak could tell there was sincerity in her friend.

“You’re welcome,” said Naem, with a slight nod of his head. He understood that Amelia was not thanking him lightly. “Though I couldn’t have done much without Jak.”

“That’s what she said, and it’s very well true, don’t you forget it.”

Naem laughed, and Jak found herself laughing as well.

“And you can also thank the Pillars of Eternity because I don’t think any of this would have worked if they didn’t work for me.”

That reminded Jak of something. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that,” she said, turning to face Naem more directly. “When Cain and I were fighting, did you feel anything, like an awareness of where we were, or some kind of dreadful pit in your stomach whenever Cain came close?”

Naem frowned, as if trying to remember. “I thought it was just my nerves, but now that you mention it, maybe. I think I felt the dread you were talking about, even before I knew for sure that Cain was coming after us.”

Jak took a deep breath. It confirmed something she suspected. “Naem, I think you might also be an Oren.”

Amelia let out a soft ‘oh’ and Naem narrowed his eyes at Jak. “How do you mean?”

“Cain once told me that he and I have a sort of connection because of our mutual status as Orens. Among other things, it allows me to sense when he’s drawing near, including where he’s coming from. Though it comes and it goes. And last night, both of us were able to sense you as well.”

“Why hasn’t this sort of thing manifested before?”

Jak shrugged. “I don’t know. Perhaps it’s tied to your magic level. Since you were using the Pillars of Eternity, maybe that enhanced your signature that we felt. But it may always have been there in some way. Maybe that’s why we sort of gravitated together when we first met.”

Naem licked his lips and glanced away. Jak felt a stab of awkwardness as well. They had done more than just ‘gravitate’ towards each other back then.

“So what does this mean?” he said after a moment.

“Well, Orens can only give extra brands if they are Gifters. Which means most Orens could go through life never knowing what they are, if they chose something other than a Gifter. But since I am also an Oren...”

“You could give me a Gifter brand, and then we could prove if I’m also an Oren or not.” Naem finished.

Jak nodded, “would you be willing?”

Naem let out a breath. “I mean, I’ve never even thought about being a Gifter before, I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“It’s okay,” said Jak. “I could teach you a few things. And when we go back to Earth, I’m sure there are still plenty of Gifters left who would be willing to instruct you as well.”

Naem nodded, “Semwei is still in Skyecliff last I heard. The city’s in ruins, but there are still plenty of people there. She wasn’t among those who were captured with me and taken to Tradehall.”

“The point is, you could learn. But I’d very much like to know if my hunch is true or not.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then you’d just be like a normal Gifter, able to give one brand and only one. It could still be useful since there are many people here who still need brands. I can’t do it for everybody.”

“Ah, well I guess that’s okay then,” said Naem. “Do you, uh, want to do that now?”

Jak met his eyes, “There’s never a better time.”

“Okay, I guess I’ll just leave you to it, then,” said Amelia, with a soft splash as she retreated back into the lake.

Jak grimaced. Was it her, or was it Naem that always made such situations awkward, even for others around them?

Naem didn’t seem to notice. Instead he offered a bare arm in front of her. She grabbed it gently with her brand hand, silently urging her Gifter magic to alight. A second later, and the lines on the back of her hand were shining with a white light. Naem didn’t wince at all as the black lines of his own Gifter brand began forming on his arm, right behind his other brands of Toughness, Healing, and his first brand of Grace.

When she was done, he waved his arm in front of his face. “Well I don’t really feel that different this time.”

Jak shrugged. “It might take some getting used to. Though I’ve found that training in one brand sometimes makes it easier to learn another one. I had a lot of training with my Gifter brand before I got Flamedancing, but I picked it right up because many of the principles are the same.”

“So how will we know if I’m an Oren like you?”

Jak glanced around until she saw a nearby tree. She briefly ran to it and pulled off a single branch. Hopefully none of the Nature Fae were nearby to see what she was doing.

She came back to Naem and held it in front of her. “Healing is one of the easiest brands to master. Do you know what it looks like?”

“You mean from having had one on my arm for the past two years?” he grinned at her.

Oh, that was right. She’d branded him with a Healing brand all

that time ago. Had it really been only two years? It felt like longer.

"Well you just imagine that becoming part of the branch, and you envision wholeness, or completion. Which isn't very hard to do, really. Here, I'll show you." She focused on the branch and activated her Gifter brand once more. A perfect Healing brand was soon etched into the bark of the small branch. When she finished, the end of the branch that had been broken off sprouted roots, and little leaves and other tendrils began spreading out from it.

"Is that normal?" Naem asked, peering closer at the branch.

Jak nodded. "If I had failed, it would have disintegrated in my hand. Now you can try. If you can get it right, then we know you're an Oren because I've already branded it once."

She handed the branch to Naem, who took it gently. He began staring at it intently, his brow furrowing as if concentrating too hard.

"Just relax and ground yourself in something true. The Gifter brand will respond to that."

He took a deep breath, and closed his eyes. Jak waited.

Suddenly his Gifter brand flared to life, and he opened his eyes. "Got it," he said. "Now to envision that Healing brand."

To Jak's delight, she saw a second Healing brand begin to form along the surface of the branch. It wasn't a flawless brand, but Jak had seen successful Healing brands at the college that were the same or worse. It could work. Assuming Naem really was another Oren.

Naem let his Gifter magic die once the Healing brand was complete. Neither of them dared to breathe.

Whereas before the branch had begun healing itself and sprouting roots, this time those roots exploded, moving at a rate so fast you would have thought a Nature Fae was controlling it. Naem held it out at arm's length, as if scared of the thing. But his smile stretched from one ear to the other. "I think it worked!"

"It did," said Jak, letting out her deep breath. In that moment something lifted off of her, a burden she had not known she was carrying. All this time she had been the sole Oren, or at least the only one on the side of the Fae. And now, after all this time, all that worship others had rendered her, all that faith, she finally wasn't alone.

She blinked her eyes rapidly, feeling them sting. But she held back the tears. Instead she clasped hands with Naem. "I'm really happy for you. And for all of us. We might just stand a chance at defeating Cain yet."

He squeezed her hand in return. "I hope so. We can do this, Jak."

Their bodies were close now, and looking up into his eyes, she found herself blushing. "Though, Naem, I hope you can understand that I do care for you, but I'm married to..."

"It's okay, Jak. I think I'm past that, or at least I will be. I've come to terms with it. We aren't meant for each other, that much is clear. At least not in that way. But we are meant to *work* with each other. And I will do all I can to make sure we defeat Cain and make Illadar a place to remember. I say we give Cain a proper run for his money."

Jak pressed her lips together in a tight smile. "Let's do it."

Epilogue

Cain stroked the Pillar of time in his arms. It was his only consolation prize, but fury bubbled within him. Never before had he been so humiliated in all his life. Once again the girl had shown more promise than he expected. This time she had compounded Healing brands to save herself. She had stupidly ignored doing so before now. Had she only finally figured it out?

Marek pulled up beside him. "I'm ready to serve," he said as he drew closer.

Anger boiled at the sight of Marek. If the idiot boy had just done as he was told after the girl first acquired the Pillar of Space, he could have avoided this whole mess. But Marek was not without his redeemable qualities. For instance, he was still loyal, even after all Cain had done to him recently. That was admirable.

"We have not suffered complete defeat," he said, once again stroking the polished black surface of the Pillar. "The power of time is finally in my grasp."

"You broke it?" said Marek. "You convinced it to work for you?"

"I did," said Cain with finality. As a demonstration, he called on the magic buried within the Pillar. A small part of it still resisted him, he would have to work on that, but that did not stop his ability to freeze time. All activity ceased around him, and he stood straighter. The feeling of power coursing through him was nothing short of exquisite. Finally he had something the girl had received with no effort at all. He nearly spat at the thought. But none of that mattered now, it was his, and his alone. Finally the work of his parents belonged to its rightful heir.

He casually walked to Marek's other side before letting the sweet ecstasy of the magic drop. "We now have a major advantage we did not possess previously."

Marek spun. To his lesser perception, Cain had just disappeared and reappeared behind him in the blink of an eye. His eyes stared at the Pillar of Eternity, with an odd look there. Was that hunger? Perhaps Cain would have to keep an eye on the boy. But for now he

could keep his loyalty with a small incentive.

"With this," Cain said, running a hand up the Pillar, "We may one day discover the secret to immortality."

Marek frowned, "I thought you were already immortal."

"A small trick, unfortunately. My Healing brands grant me long life, but they do not grant immortality. I've managed to live for millenia by a form of, you might call it hibernation. A gift granted from some technology my parents salvaged from their former life among the stars. It allowed me to remain as I am now over the centuries, but I was confined to one place, and I was not conscious. But with the Pillar, we might obtain true immortality. It may be the only way."

Marek was looking at the Pillar with new eyes. "And...would you grant this gift to me as well."

Cain hid a smile. That was it. Give the boy a reason to stay, to covet what Cain knew. "It may be possible," was all he said.

Marek's eyes met his, and Cain saw an eagerness that had not been there before. Motivation. It was a powerful thing. Marek's face was a mask of determination. "What's our next move?"



SOMEWHERE FAR DISTANT, a single orange-scaled dragon floated through the stars. He was far from his old home, now a distant blue dot behind him. He hadn't cared much for that home. There were people who hurt him there, and it wasn't easy to hurt a dragon.

He sought a new home, one he could sense in the distance, past that flaming orb of pure energy that lay straight ahead. He would have to fly around that, since not even he could stand being too close. His body could withstand a lot, even this lack of wind and...well anything around him. He had lain for centuries at the bottom of a giant pit of molten earth. This was hardly different by comparison.

His speed constantly increased, unhindered by the air of his former home, which had slowed him down and kept him from reaching the speeds at which he was truly capable. Out here, his magic would simply propel him faster and faster, until he was flying the length of his old home in the blink of an eye.

Still, his new home would take some time to reach. But it was going to be worth it. He could feel the man there, the one from the mountain top. He would find that man and discover what had drawn them together the last time they met. A connection had been made, and now he must follow it.

Soon, he would arrive at his new home, to meet his new master, if

master he was. Soon, he would have answers. Soon.

Author's Note

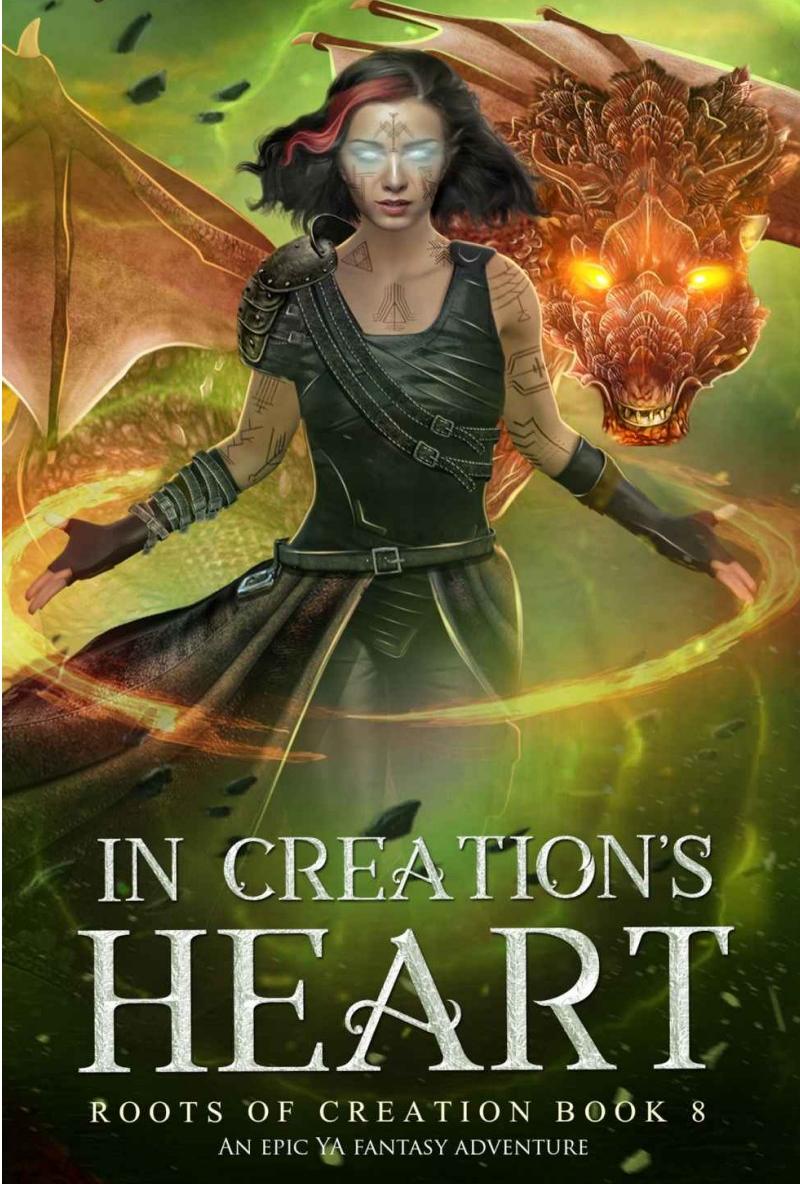
Only one more to go! I admit, even I was stumped for a while trying to figure out how Jak was going to get her abilities back. Sometimes we authors have everything planned out from the very beginning. But when I got to the end of book 5, I knew I had to change things up in a big way. And so Jak went powerless for most of two books.

Well, now you know what happens. From here on out, there is nothing but huge, climatic war on an epic scale. Jak and Cain are basically god-like in their power, and that will show during the final book.

I hope you have enjoyed this series thus far, and I can't wait for you to join me for the final piece of the tale, when Jak goes up against Cain, as well as her childhood friend, in their greatest battle yet. See you again soon!

The Story Continues In...

JASON HAMILTON



IN CREATION'S HEART

ROOTS OF CREATION BOOK 8
AN EPIC YA FANTASY ADVENTURE

The playing field is level, or so everyone thinks...

After a costly victory against their enemy, Jak now possesses her brands, and one of the two Pillars of Eternity. Yet Cain is still as powerful as she, if not more-so. And he still retains the other Pillar.

Demons are gathering throughout the land, and if Jak can't do anything to stop it, everyone and everything will burn. But whether they win or lose, this will be the last confrontation.

Together with Naem, Seph, Skellig, and all those who have helped her in the past, Jak must face Cain for the last time. That final battle and more in this, the eighth and final book in the Roots of Creation series.

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